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Reading Between the Baselines: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Elite Women's Tennis

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Feminist Studies

by

Anita Stahl

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June 2021

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Reading Between the Baselines: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Elite Women's Tennis

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by

Anita Stahl

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ABSTRACT

Reading Between the Baselines: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Elite Women's Tennis

by

Anita Stahl

“Reading Between the Baselines: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Elite Women’s Tennis,” theorizes how women’s elite tennis functions as both an expression and incubator of discourse. The global dispersion of professional tennis tournaments and the international background of those who travel with the tour make it into a quasi-diasporic space defined by perpetual movement, competition, and precarity. This project engages with a series of interrelated questions: First, what does the women’s professional tennis tour articulate concerning global regimes of gender, sexuality, and race? Secondly, how do these regimes circulate and reproduce through the tour? And third, how does the tour shape experiences of gender, sexuality, and race globally?

I argue that the Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) tour is not only a manifestation of various cultures, but through its policies, players, and media, it also molds discourses at the sites of its audiences. In five chapters, I show the ways in which knowledges about gender, sexuality, and race are inscribed on the bodies of Serena Williams, Maria Sharapova, and other womens tennis stars. These inscriptions are disseminated widely by the apparatuses of the entertainment and advertising industries and constitute a powerful site of social instruction about the normative boundaries of gender, race, and sexuality that transgress national borders. I draw on my own

background as a tennis writer and photographer, using my experience in media centers at some of the world's biggest tournaments to better understand where knowledges about tennis come from and what editorial decisions shape mainstream representations. My insider-outsider dive into the creation of discourse forms the backbone of this analysis.

My dissertation reads the women's professional tennis tour and its history as a text to be analyzed. Chapter 1 explores the fight for equal pay in tennis, asking what the labor of a professional tennis player is, if women demand equal pay on the grounds of equal work while competing in a separate system. Chapter 2 argues that while women's tennis markets itself openly to US audiences as an LGBT-friendly sport, the tour and its culture actively discourage queer visibility by foregrounding Western models of identarian sexuality and dismissing queer potentiality outside of that imagination. Chapter 3 draws on Foucauldian theory, philosophy, and sports physiology to argue that prohibitions against loud grunting are intended to shame women into a silence that physically weakens them. Chapter 4 turns to formal logic to incorporate the superaltern as an analytic to theorize an individual ultra-elite position in post-Cold War power formations contrasted with the subaltern; I do this by tracing Maria Sharapova's doping scandal back to the Chernobyl disaster and American interest in minimizing the public's concern with radioactive fallout. Chapter 5 examines how Serena Williams has deployed social media to construct a nuanced self-representation that resists mainstream representations of her that are rooted in essentialist logics about Black women. I conclude that elite women's tennis forges and circulates regimes of gender, sexuality, and race as they function globally.

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Introduction

You Can't Eat a Crown

The title of my dissertation, “Reading Between the Baselines,” captures the core intent of my project. Two baselines, 78 feet apart, contain the entirety of a tennis court. A tennis match played between them can be broadcast live with millions of dollars attached to it, or a match can happen in the obscurity of a neighborhood court with nothing to lose. A world of meaning can be ascribed to what happens between baselines, but in the end, it is just people playing. In my research, the fun and playfulness of tennis is something I never want to lose, which is why the title of my dissertation is a pun. My work is a project of reading between the lines metaphorically and literally. A professional tennis player’s tweet, a newspaper article about a match, or an on-court meltdown are not always what they seem on the surface; I use my extensive knowledge of the sport and my training in Feminist Studies to read between the lines. The global discourses of gender, sexuality, and race are inscribed, incubated, and circulated through the profession women’s tennis circuit.

As a sport, tennis is a way for people to make sense of the world off the court as much as on. Attempting to answer the question, “What is it then that men [sic] put into sport?” Roland Barthes said: “Themselves, their human universe. Sport is made in order to speak the human contract.”¹ Sport is an incubator to observe people at their best and worst. It is a place to watch normal human emotion and experiences play out in fantastical ways under tremendous pressure. Whereas pop stars can rehearse their concerts as often as they please and actors can redo a scene until the director is satisfied it was done correctly, tennis

¹ Barthes, *What Is Sport?*, 65.

players perform alone in front of mass audiences while their opponent tries at every turn to overwhelm them. Each match is different, old opponents try new strategies, different winds and light angles favor some players on unpredictable days. Despite preparing for the professional tennis circuit since childhood, players must continuously improvise to surprise opponents and adjust to the other's strengths and weaknesses. Unlike other celebrities, there is an innate rawness to the professional athlete's performance and how they become known to the public. It creates in spectators an impression of authenticity to see someone performing under constant pressure. These conditions, the tensions, inscribe meaning onto sport in a unique way that expresses aspects of the human experience.

Studying women's elite tennis and its history, I found a prescient observation that Althea Gibson made in the nineteen fifties captures the politics behind my work.² An African American woman playing in the amateur era—a time when players were not allowed to have sponsors sponsorships or play for high prize money—she reflected on living in poverty despite winning the biggest tournaments in the world: “. . . being the Queen of Tennis is all well and good, but you can't eat a crown.”³ Ten years after Gibson retired, in 1968, women's tennis entered the open era, meaning women could earn unrestricted income from playing. By 2019, all top-ten earning women athletes in the world were tennis players.⁴ The list was topped by another African American woman, Serena Williams. This represents incredible progress but obscures the discrimination that women in tennis still routinely face

² For the purposes of this chapter, I use the term “women” to refer to athletes who self-identify as such in accordance with the Women's Tennis Association's Gender Participation Policy. My use of binary gender is not intended as an endorsement of that policy or social norm but as a shorthand to distinguish between gendered tennis systems and signal social expectations associated with them. For the WTA's policy and most recent eligibility requirements, see: <https://www.wtatennis.com/wta-rules>

³ Jurejko, “Althea Gibson.”

⁴ Badenhause, “The Highest-Paid Female Athletes 2019: Serena And Osaka Dominate.”

in the sport celebrated for the earning potential it gives women. Whereas Williams earned \$29.2M in 2019, there were 62 male athletes who earned more than her, including four tennis players.⁵ The top earning men's athlete, soccer star Lionel Messi, took home \$127M, more than four times her earnings. The top earning men's tennis player, Roger Federer, earned more than three times her income.⁶ While Williams surely has no trouble putting food on the table, as Gibson did, the metaphorical crown she wears is the same. It is also the crown Roger Federer wears when he wins the same tournaments she does. For all her accomplishments and accolades, Serena Williams is the only woman to be ranked in the world's top 100 earning athletes.

The titles for winning Wimbledon and being ranked the best player in the world year after year have vastly different implications depending on generation, gender, and race. While rhetoric about equality, diversity, and inclusion abounds in tennis just like other neoliberal industries and spaces, one does not have to scratch deep past the surface to see the limitations. Publicly celebrating progress and diversity in the sport today, such as with the US Tennis Association's (USTA) Diversity and Inclusion Initiative,⁷ masks the significant ways gender, race, and sexuality still impact elite players' experiences in professional tennis. Serena Williams may be the Queen of Tennis, but she only earns a third of what the King does. My dissertation specifically looks at the sport as it is played by the top earning women athletes to show how intersectional oppressions and discrimination are endemic in global

⁵ No.5: Roger Federer \$93.4M; no. 17: Novak Djokovic \$50.6M; no. 35: Kei Nishikori \$37.3M; no. 37 Rafael Nadal \$35M Badenhausen, "The World's Highest-Paid Athletes 2019."

⁶ Badenhausen.

⁷ "About USTA Diversity & Inclusion."

economies in such a way that even the most accomplished women are routinely held back by cis-white-hetero-patriarchy's institutional reach.

My research interest specifically in *elite* tennis lies in the queer, marginal, and unusual position innate to being elite. Disability studies scholar Lennard Davis argues that the industrial revolution brought normalization processes into the central organizing principles of modern society.⁸ As Davis described, people are placed on a bell curve per their distance from a norm, and he focuses on the lowest ends of the bell curve to make claims about society and culture at large and how disability constructs ability. My work is a sort of inverse with the same goal: how does super-ability create ability? Queer theorists, such as Gayle Rubin, have shown that intellectual attention to sexual deviants produces knowledge about the normative circles that exclude them.⁹ I agree that looking at those on the margins of the bell curve provides valuable insights for the full range of experiences, including the center of the mass and the marginalized. I extend the logics of Davis and Rubin to look at the outliers who represent the exceptionally good. I consider how race, gender, and sexuality are constructed and communicated through some of the most powerful women in the world, who are privileged through their wealth, fame, and excellence at their craft. This dissertation argues that the WTA tour is not only an expression of various cultures, but through its rules, codes, and policies, it also helps mold discourses globally.

My use of “global” attends to the roles of both colonialism and neoliberalism. Film and media scholar Bhaskar Sarkar cautions that common use of the word “global” can have a universalist ring or be used in a context that centers the West as “global” and creates an

⁸ Davis, “Constructing Normalcy.”

⁹ Rubin, *Deviations*.

“other” that is “local.”¹⁰ While tennis finds its origins in the West, which still clings to power controlling much of the rules and procedures, I argue that the numerous influences stemming from tournament sites and player origins become part of creating the regimes of race, gender, and sexuality that flow back through them and into other spheres. Sarkar argues for an understanding of “global” that is composed of local nodes, a “global-as-emergence” that is “characterized by the dual conditions of relationality and mutability; I call this compound spatiotemporal characteristic *plasticity*.”¹¹ With tournament schedules and sites in constant flux adjusting to trends, such as 21st century push for an “Asian-swing” on the women’s tour to bring in money from expanding economies that added many tournaments in China and across East Asia,¹² the many local nodes of tournament sites and player hometowns, along with the sites fans and officials hail from, create the many local nodes from which the global tour emerges as a unit.

The women’s tennis tour is part of global civil society and as such expresses conflicts, tensions, and values from across the various cultures and societies it touches. To use global governance scholar Mary Kaldor’s definition, civil society is “the process through which individuals negotiate, argue, struggle against or agree with each other and with the centres of political and economic authority.”¹³ Elite women’s tennis is a valuable site to study social structures because it facilitates this global process of negotiation. The global dispersion of the professional tennis circuit and the individuals who travel with it, combined

¹⁰ Sarkar, “Plasticity and the Global,” 451–52.

¹¹ Sarkar, 453.

¹² “WTA to Start 2019 Asian Swing with New Premier Event in Zhengzhou.”

¹³ Kaldor, “The Idea of Global Civil Society,” 585.

with the nature of professional sport, make the tour into a quasi-diasporic space defined by perpetual movement, competition, and precarity.

The impact that life on a world tour has on players reaches into the lives and conversations of ordinary citizens in their home and host countries when players share their experiences. On social media and in interviews, players reach fans far from the metropolises where the biggest tournaments are played. Emphasizing the global reach of the tour, the WTA hosted 55 tournaments in 29 countries in 2019 alone. In 2019, the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) hosted 55 tournaments in 29 countries. Players competed under 100 different flags and were watched by approximately 600 million people worldwide and competed for a total of \$164 Million dollars.¹⁴ Not only are the tour and players global, but the fan base through which the discourses circulate is dispersed across the world as well. In 2019, the top ten earning WTA players represent eight different nations and span ages from 22 to 39 years.¹⁵ In the US, players like Elina Svitolina and Karolína Plíšková are virtually unknown outside the tennis community, but in their home countries, Ukraine and the Czech Republic respectively, they are household names with the power to create and shift discourse around social topics like gender and femininity. The impact tour life has on them reaches into the lives and conversations of ordinary citizens in those countries when players share their experiences on social media and interviews that reach fans far from the metropolises where the biggest tournaments are played.

¹⁴ "About the WTA."

¹⁵ Top ten earning female athletes of 2019: No. 1 Williams, S. (USA); no.2 Osaka (JAP); no. 3 Kerber (GER); no. 4 Halep (ROU); no. 5 Stephens (USA); no. 6 Wozniacki (DEN); no. 7 Sharapova (RUS); no. 8 Plíšková (CZE); no. 9 Svitolina (UKR); no. 10 tie Williams, V. (USA) and Muguruza (ESP) Badenhausen, "The Highest-Paid Female Athletes 2019: Serena And Osaka Dominate."

In Chapter 1 grapple with the fundamental question of what the labor of a professional tennis player is. For women to demand equal pay on the grounds of equal work, they must first define the work. Chapter 2 considers the role of culture bound concepts of identity in global marketing, arguing that while women's tennis portrays itself an LGBT-friendly sport to US audiences, the tour and its culture actively discourage queer visibility. Chapter 3 analyzes how audiences and players weaponize femininity to weaken opponents; regulations against grunting demand players discipline the body into silence, which disrupts the player performance for the pleasure of the spectators and the neutralization of a competitive advantage.¹⁶ Chapter 4 turns to formal logic to neologize the term "superaltern" as an analytic to theorize an individual ultra-elite position in global discourse, opposite the more familiar subaltern. I do this by tracing Maria Sharapova's doping scandal back to the Chernobyl disaster and the indigenous Slavic peoples left behind. The potential of an individual to shape norms and discourses is examined further in Chapter 5, which analyzes how Serena Williams has deployed social media to construct a nuanced self-representation that resists mainstream depictions of her that are rooted in racist and sexist ideas about Black women.

Research Methodology

Throughout the dissertation, I examine how sport is institutionalized and the ways it creates and contests social categories, navigating social politics in transnational and hybridized spaces. Moreover, I seek to answer questions about how elite women's tennis structures the lives of ordinary people, globally, by way of the social categories circulated

¹⁶ A version of Chapter 3 will be included in the forthcoming *Somaesthetics and Sport*, part of Brill's series Studies in Somaesthetics, edited by Andrew Edgar and William Morgan.

through the sport. First, what does the women's professional tennis tour articulate concerning global regimes of gender, sexuality, and race? Secondly, how do these regimes circulate and reproduce through the tour? And third, how does the tour shape experiences of gender, sexuality, and race globally?

My multi-method research to address these questions centers around intersectional feminist discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis seeks to "relate theories of language to theories of society."¹⁷ It works to "raise critical consciousness about the discursive dimensions of social problems involving discrimination, disadvantage, and dominance with the aim of contributing to broader emancipatory projects."¹⁸ For intersectional feminism, this means specifically with an eye to how race, gender, sexuality and other aspects of a person's identity, background, and lived experiences compound around these discriminations and disadvantages.¹⁹

My analytic approach is queer in a classical sense, consciously resisting definition, normalcy, and discipline as a part of its essence. Using sports broadcasts, gossip, and Instagram posts as some of the basis for my analysis, I am inspired by J. Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure*, in which he adapts Stuart Hall's work on low theory: "Low theory tries to locate all the in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony [...] in order to push through the divisions between life and art, practice and theory, thinking and doing, and into a more chaotic realm of knowing and unknowing."²⁰ In

¹⁷ John Flowerdew and John E. Richardson, *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*, 2.

¹⁸ Michelle M. Lazar, "Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis."

¹⁹ Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics."

²⁰ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2.

this model, “theory is not an end unto itself but ‘a detour en route to something else.’”²¹ Refusing a single perspective and foraging through many disciplines, epistemologies, and methodologies for the best tools that can be adapted to interpret findings. By using queer theoretical approaches to tie together experiences and knowledges, I build new knowledges about the invisible organizing structures that bind experiences.

Across chapters, I vary the precise analytic approaches according to the available archives or sources, to allow for more expansive trans-historical and trans-cultural research. Each chapter analyzes and theorizes particular, players, conversations and scandals and interprets them and their impact in a larger context outside of professional women’s tennis. The research uses discourse analysis to make sense of multi-disciplinary scholars’ archival research and ethnographic approaches to the production of discourse. For example, I use medical anthropologist Adriana Petryna framework of biological citizenship to make sense of medical data, cases in the Court of Arbitration for Sport, and personal narratives from the Chernobyl region.

The bulk of my sources were collected from publicly available and widely distributed media sources, such as *New York Times* articles, live broadcasts, and social media content. These sources reflect how most people experience professional tennis and are a significant part of shaping perceptions and discourse. My own experiences of participants observation in the field frame my interpretation of the data I collected, even in cases that specific moments or interviews are not cited, because much of the field work shaped my world view and impressions in intrinsic ways that in my mind are not tied to any individual observations.

²¹ Halberstam, 15.

I draw on my own background as freelance tennis writer and photographer, to use my experience in press conference rooms and media offices to better understand where knowledges about tennis come from and what editorial decisions are made to shape public perceptions. For example, when many fans were outraged at Serena Williams being scheduled for a smaller conference room at the 2019 French Open while Austrian man Dominic Thiem was in the main room, I had an insider perspective into how these conferences are scheduled. Through my freelance work, I know about the decisions, timing, and serendipity that create these moments that are then interpreted by outside observers who are only privy to the surface information. My participant observation in women's tennis has given me insights to get a fuller picture of what happens behind the scenes to better analyze what is significantly mediated before reaching the public sphere where most fans and academics first access it.

With access to players and media, I occasionally blurred the lines between my roles as scholar and journalists, asking questions inspired by my research. The range of questions I could ask at any moment was restrained by balancing what players, moderators, and media colleagues would tolerate. Wasting the time of players who are exhausted after a match or media that have questions to get answered before deadline will at best isolate a journalist so they are no longer called on or at worst lead to the revocation of credentials. As sociologist Tey Meadow explains, the people we analyze “are also laboring, watching us, making meaning of us. These interpersonal processes should be treated as an important form of data.”²² The interactions I had as a participant observer are fraught with constraints of the roles people play in media centers—spaces built for the express purpose of crafting and

²² Meadow, “Studying Each Other.”

communicating public narratives about tennis with an eye to mutual marketability for the host tournament, players, and media outlets. Consequently, I understand these surrounding circumstances as context to the discursive elements I analyze, taking little at face value or in isolation, interested more in the work that certain claims do, rather than reaching for a truth of them. For example, when Serena Williams claimed that she was targeted with racist aggression at a large tournament; my research into the event is not to find a truth of what was said to her that day, but to contextualize the meaning of her allegations and how they were framed by media.

Serving Scholarly Contributions

As an interdisciplinary project, this dissertation draws from and contributes to a number of scholarly fields, primarily feminist studies, sports studies, and labor studies. When US feminist scholars have done analyses of sport as work, they have mostly focused on national contexts, such as the WNBA²³ or soccer.²⁴ Tennis, however, occupies a unique place as the only world-wide professional sport with relative gender parity in terms of prize money, ratings, and ticket sales. With a geographically diverse subject, I build a labor theory for sport that transcends national borders and economies. While some Olympic sports have gender parity, they are ontologically different because they are amateur sports. I take tennis seriously as labor and use a Marxist feminist approach to theorizing what players do on and off the court.²⁵ I bring this labor studies approach into the realm of sports studies,²⁶

²³ Duru, “Hoop Dreams Deferred.” McDonald, “The Marketing of the Women’s National Basketball Association and the Making of Postfeminism.”

²⁴ Allison, “Privileging Difference: Negotiating Gender Essentialism in U.S. Women’s Professional Soccer.”

appreciating that athletic labor and paid celebrity are significantly different from a typical waged job and require an adapted analysis.

The constant flux of the women's professional tennis tour and the wealth of spheres it influences demands complex theorization of its reach. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai argued in 1990 that, "the new global cultural economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models."²⁷ Appadurai offers five dimensions of cultural flow to understand this disjuncture. The ethnoscape defines the shifts and movements of people, be they groups or individuals, relocating permanently or just visiting. The technoscape describes the movement of technology, "mechanical and informational" distributed globally at ever-increasing rates. Financescapes refers to the movement of global capital. Mediascapes are the flow of information, pictures, and narratives. Ideoscapes describes the movement of ideologies. By Appadurai's theory, global flows occur "in and through the growing disjuncture" of these five dimensions.²⁸

While my dissertation does not specifically engage with women's tennis in these exact terms, they are a useful framing for the outset to explain the global scope of my topic. I conceive of tennis as a lens to better understand the underlying theories and phenomena of experiencing globalized life. In different terminologies, my dissertation shows how elite

²⁵ For more see Weeks, *The Problem with Work*; Ahmed, "Affective Economies."

²⁶ Sports studies or "sport and society studies" emerged out of the sociology of sports. The multidisciplinary field has grown to include "those who study sports as social phenomena, namely anthropologists, economists, geographers, philosophers, psychologists, political scientists as well as sociologists." Coakley and Dunning, *Handbook of Sports Studies*. p. xxi

²⁷ Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," 296.

²⁸ Appadurai, 301.

women's tennis expresses Appadurai's five dimensions and the disjunctures. My work offers intersectional feminist frameworks to examine phenomena like media, identity politics, bodies, and money in global flows that ostensibly have nothing to do with tennis but exist in the same economies and are subject to the same discourses.

My dissertation is unique in how it brings together feminist studies, labor studies, and sports studies with an attention to specific experiences of individual actors in the public eye. My approach is guided by framing the global public through the actions, behaviors, and representations of a global elite. Below, I discuss exactly how this dissertation contributes to each of these fields.

Feminist Studies

Feminist academics²⁹ have written about each of these tennis stars, and primarily Serena Williams, but without the necessary understanding of tennis's history and culture to account for the complexities of their subjects. As someone who has professionally and passionately worked in both worlds, academia and tennis, I am uniquely positioned to do this research. One factor that makes my work different from other efforts is how I bridge topical expertise and scholarly analysis. Lay experts in the sport have written extensively about sexism and racism in tennis,³⁰ but without the background to contextualize their subjects with a transnational or intersectional lens.

²⁹ For example: Douglas, "Venus, Serena, and the Inconspicuous Consumption of Blackness"; Spencer, "Sister Act VI: Venus and Serena Williams at Indian Wells: 'Sincere Fictions' and White Racism."

³⁰ For example: Lichtenstein, *A Long Way, Baby*; Mewshaw, *Ladies of the Court*; Wertheim, *Venus Envy*.

Other academics have relied entirely on the mediated public personas of celebrity athletes, which is important work because that is what the fans and public see.³¹ For example, scholars analyzing Serena Williams yelling at a US Open chair umpire based on viral news clips of the event misses a long history of personal relationships between players, coaches, and officials that went into what unfolded on court that day.³² Just like racist media following the event did not emerge in a vacuum, the viral outburst did not either. My experience allows me to analyze Serena Williams as a public figure who people attach sentiment to, without losing sight of her as an individual actor navigating a web of relationships behind the scenes.

My attention to the global throughout complicates the understandings of these social structures, as different people on court in any of the moments discussed were socialized with different meanings attached to behaviors and identities. Chapter 5, “This Tournament Will Be Tweeted” exemplifies my contributions in this area. Analyzing Serena Williams’ appearances at Indian Wells, I explain the relationships between the different actors and stakeholders as part of the analysis of the intersectional oppressions she faced and the way these were simplified in academic, popular press, and fan accounts of the event.

My dissertation contributes to feminist studies in a novel way by examining how sound and the body fit into ideals of femininity. Chapter 3 considers Foucauldian theory of surveillance and conventions of femininity alongside sports physiology to argue that competitive sporting success is inherently at odds with traditional femininity. This provides an important perspective in any approach to studying women in sports and arguably other

³¹ For example: Schultz, “Reading the Catsuit.”

³² For example: Jessica Love and Lindsey Conlin Maxwell, “Serena Williams: From Catsuit to Controversy.”

manual labor and the conflicting position they are in if expressing a feminine gender identity.

Labor Studies

My contribution to labor studies is my analysis of the tensions of women's tennis superstars representing an elite workforce on the one hand, while occupying a precarious, manual, migratory labor position on the other. In certain ways, players are vulnerable to the same exploitations as other women who travel for work, be they nannies or garment workers. An injury could completely derail a player's career. Standing up for political commitments or authentic self-expression can compromise their value in the labor market. In the cases I look at, players as individuals navigate the difficult position of being symbols for nations and brands while also being people with relationships and preferences.

In Chapter 2, "Love Means Nothing," I analyze the difficulty migratory laborers face in a global marketplace when it comes to expressing personal beliefs about homosexuality. Tennis players are accountable to stakeholders in locales that run the gamut in political, social, and cultural beliefs. Directly expressing an opinion or declaring an identity in terms that are conventional in a player's home country risks alienating fans, tournament officials, or sponsors in another space they work in. As a result, elite players today have developed public identities that refuse to articulate political or politicized beliefs. Instead, they maneuver in a way that maximizes cross-cultural appeal and does not risk offending and alienating fans, sponsors, or local hosts.

Chapter 1, "We Have a Long Way to Go, Baby," contributes to labor studies by analyzing the affective attachments and rhetorical strategies behind arguments used against

equal pay by gender. Using tennis as an example, I identify the strategies by which people oppose paying women the same wages as men. Specifically, I argue they do so by claiming the work women do is not equal in some capacity. This analysis is particularly valuable for approaching equal pay in sports, but with slight adaptation can be modeled to fit other occupations as well.

Sports Studies

In sports studies, I contribute approaches to analyze how women fit into professional competition. Tennis is celebrated as a model for equality, because globally it is leagues ahead of any other professional sport in terms of what it offers women, but my critical perspective on the experiences of top women's tennis players shows how limited the potential for women still is. By showing the institutionalized sexism, racism, and homophobia at the top, I work toward establishing the severity and pervasiveness of the problem and caution against using tennis as a yard stick for social progress. This work complements efforts by scholars identifying the same issues at youth, recreational, and amateur levels.³³

My fourth chapter, "Global Logics of Power After the Atomic Age," demonstrates how the high valuation of sports and fitness in neoliberalism serves social stratification through health discourses. After the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant's accident that spewed radioactive material over large swaths of Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia, local and national agencies sought to minimize the long-term health impact of the disaster. Maria Sharapova, whose family is from the region, was used by the United Nations to model an uplift narrative

³³ This includes the work of such scholars as Michael Messner, Alan Klein, and Cheryl Cook among others.

that she overcame her roots. Through charity work in the region, she has contributed to the discourse that people locally need to lift themselves up through healthier choices. This shows the danger of discursively constructing sport as a means of self-improvement in neoliberal conditions that punish ill people for not working hard enough. The philosophy and use of sport, its value to culture and society, needs to be interrogated consistently lest it play into the hands of agencies that use it to discredit the needs of an othered population that does or cannot embrace sport the same way.

Conclusion: Here You Go

While the exact origins of the name “tennis” are unknown, one of the most commonly accepted theories is that it comes from the French “tenir,” a transitive verb. Exclaimed before a serve, in its conjugated form “tenez,” it translates loosely as “here you go” or “take it.”³⁴ This exclamation at the core of tennis is a polite warning for the imminent and violent act of whipping a ball in an opponent’s direction. At its core, any sport is only a mutually agreed upon set of rules through which athletes battle, allowing for the physicality of violence without its full threat. The WTA’s 2019 rulebook is 512 pages long; it defines players’ rights and obligations in the association; it includes a code of conduct and list of punishments; it defines how much time players can take to use the bathroom and how big a logo they can wear on their shirts. How these rules are created, followed, enforced, skirted, and adapted over time are the moments that make up the experience of sports for players and spectators. Tenez is a warning, but tennis sets the limits.

³⁴ Whitman, *Tennis*. 24

Gender equality is promoted as a central tenant of global tennis institutions that set the rules. The Constitution of the International Tennis Federation (ITF), the sport's primary governing body, stipulates that the organization will "carry out its objects and purposes without unfair discrimination on grounds of colour, race, nationality, ethnic or national origin, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability or religion."³⁵ However, reading between the lines of this statement shows the sorts of ruptures I analyze in this dissertation. The description from the ITF invites the question: is their "fair" discrimination on any of these grounds? In another paragraph where the constitution speaks to promoting "equal opportunities" for girls and women in tennis participation and leadership.³⁶ This is in the section specifying the creation of the "Gender Equality in Tennis Committee," a committee the ITF announced in 2017 to be added the following year. Originally, it was announced as the "Women in Sport Committee," but the name was changed after the first meeting for reasons that were not made public.³⁷ Not only, does the language announcing the committee concede that boys and men have the power currently, but again the wording exposes the superficiality of including the phrase in the constitution to begin with. "Opportunities" are not the same thing as results and to promise them has no meaningful bearing on how officials abiding by the constitution act to advance women.

Any organized sport is premised on the agreement to a set of rules that are to be enforced fairly. The sport's governing body's position reflects the ethos of the sport's global community of players, fans, and officials. The constitution acknowledges the importance of

³⁵ "The Constitution of ITF Limited." Section IV. (o).

³⁶ "The Constitution of ITF Limited." Bye-laws of ITF Limited, Section 9.1. (l). "Gender Equality in Tennis Committee"

³⁷ "ITF Creates Women in Sport Committee."

inclusion and fairness, while simultaneously legitimizing disparate treatment of men and women under the guise of “fairness.” In other words, discrimination and unequal treatment and results in tennis can, under ITF rules, be permitted if they are deemed fair under the circumstances. Meaningful commitment to advancing gender equality in the sport would promise that the organization would carry out its objectives “without discrimination” on any of the named grounds without allowing for a caveat of fair or reasonable discrimination. Organizational commitment to promoting the women and girls would simply promise to do just that with necessary resources that acknowledge how and why the sport’s leadership structure is dominated by men and masculinity.

On a tennis court, the baselines are separated by a net. That barrier keeps players separated during the match, but the essence of the game is to keep the ball moving over it, picking up momentum and then being violently redirected once it reaches the player at the opposing baseline. Without touching, the players are constantly engaged with each other, playing off each other’s strengths and weaknesses. The many courts where the women’s professional tennis tour compete are separated by national borders, but the roving nature of tour creates a constant exchange across them. Like a ball being knocked around a court, treated with violence and finesse, discipline and reckless abandon, ideas of gender, race, and sexuality circulate across tennis courts around the globe. In perpetual motion through constant redirections, the players try to be fully aware of what happens on the other side of the net; but, any error in judgment can quickly bring the point to a grinding halt and change the scoreboard. The meanings of gender, sexuality, and race get picked up by media and fans before returning to the realm of powerful tennis players and officials who in turn act on those meanings before sending them back into the world. Scandals, moments of rupture

created by racism, sexism, and homophobia in the sport's history are benchmarks to trace social progress narratives. This dissertation theorizes how women's elite tennis functions as both an expression of and incubator for regimes of race, gender, and sexuality as they function globally.

A Brief History of Women's Tennis: You've Come a Long Way, Baby

To frame the contemporary and recent issues in tennis, I begin with an overview of the of how women's professional tennis developed. As will become clear through this dissertation, the tennis universe is a small one and actors across generations continue to interact and define stories through coaching and commentating careers. Each generation of players routinely encounter those who came before them. With the activist history that made women's tennis what it is, the stakes are often personal to those involved who want to protect their own legacies as much as the sport and business they still feel ownership over.

Historically, tennis has been a sport of the elites. It claims origins in 15th Century France, where it is said to have been played by royalty before the French Revolution. The first woman recorded playing a version of the sport was Lady Margot of Paris, who was beat the best men's players of her generation in 1427.³⁸ The sport known as court tennis continued to develop in France until the French gentry fled to England during the revolution late in the 18th Century. Sports historians believe English royalty took up the sport and adapted it into lawn tennis, a more direct antecedent to the sport as it is popularly played today.³⁹

The sport was more formally institutionalized in the 19th Century when clubs were organized to host tournaments. With that institutionalization came common rules and equipment standards.⁴⁰ As the sport grew more competitive and popular, the US National

³⁸ King and Starr, *We Have Come a Long Way*, 2.

³⁹ Whitman, *Tennis*, 33–37.

⁴⁰ Collins and Hollander, *The Bud Collins History of Tennis*, 6–7.

Lawn Tennis Association was formed in 1881 to organize tournaments.⁴¹ In 1896, tennis was included at the first modern Olympics in Athens, a novelty project funded by British gentlemen with a romantic notion of the ancient Games.⁴² From its earliest days, the exclusive nature of competitive tennis popularized it as a sport for the elite. There was a series of tournaments referred to as the “Riviera season” that was played in Southern France in the winter. Bud Collins, a tennis commentator who also wrote about the sport’s history explained that by 1914 the Riviera season was “a well-established feature of the game, reflecting an exclusive atmosphere of fashion, wealth, royalty and internationalism.”⁴³ The cost of attendance, by the expense of travel and lodging alone, ensured only a specific clientele would compete, even without formal barriers being written into rules.

Women players were a part of tennis since sport’s institutionalization. In a history of women’s tennis, Billie Jean King hypothesized that women were welcomed into the sport, “because tennis was originally so genteel, it was considered a proper pastime for a well-bred English lady. She could dress up for a garden party in all her Victorian ruffles and the bustle out onto the court just as she was.”⁴⁴ In the 19th Century, women took to the court in skirts that grazed the ground, collars that reached their jawline, and sleeves extending to their wrists, not to mention corsets and petticoats. The English national tennis club in Wimbledon added a women’s championship to their schedule in 1884, though not without debate over the perils of encouraging competitiveness in women. The US national championships that

⁴¹ Collins and Hollander, 8.

⁴² Collins and Hollander, 15.

⁴³ Collins and Hollander, 15.

⁴⁴ King and Starr, *We Have Come a Long Way*, 2.

started as a men's event in 1881 added women in 1887. Previously, Bermuda and Ireland had introduced women's championships, in 1876 and 1879, respectively.⁴⁵

In 1888, the first “battle of the sexes” exhibition match was played pitting a man against a woman for the spectacle of gendered competition. Charlotte Dod, the top woman of her generation, faced the Wimbledon's men's champion, Ernest Renshaw. They had previously competed together on the same side of the net in mixed doubles. He was handicapped with a 30-0 deficit in each game; and as Billie Jean King has pointed out, she was handicapped with a corset, the traditional women's tennis wear of the time. He narrowly won the match with a final score of 2-6, 7-5, 7-5. The score line indicates he struggled to find his way into the match, dropping the first set, and had issues stringing together consecutive points in short games that she could win with two points.⁴⁶

Frenchwoman Suzanne Lenglen was the first superstar of women's tennis and arguably of women's sport altogether, reaching her prime playing days in the 1920s. She revolutionized the competition, wearing mid-calf skirts, short sleeves, and forgoing corsets altogether. A reporter from that period described her athletic style as reminiscent of “the movement of fire over prairie grass.”⁴⁷ Billie Jean King described her as, “theatrical, controversial, and if not beautiful, certainly glamorous—she often repaired her makeup between sets—she was the first champion whose personality and actions away from the court drew as much interest as her unparalleled play.”⁴⁸ This was the amateur era of tennis, when championships were closed to professionals, defined as anyone making their living off

⁴⁵ King and Starr, 5.

⁴⁶ King and Starr, 11.

⁴⁷ King and Starr, 24.

the sport. In this manner, tennis federations and clubs could ensure that only players with a moneyed background were able compete on the circuit.

As Lenglen began to sell out matches, the debate over paying players took hold. She was driving revenue for tournaments while only winning token amounts that did not sustain her lifestyle while travelling the world to play. In her words, “If we amateurs are to contribute a life’s work to learning to play for nothing, why isn’t there an amateur gallery which can look on for nothing?”⁴⁹ Her comment ties the exploitation of players to the class limits in spectatorship as well. In 1926, she declared herself a professional and accepted \$50,000 for signing on to an exhibition match circuit. Doing so, she was automatically banned from prestigious championships like Wimbledon, London and Forest Hills, New York.⁵⁰

National federations like the United States Lawn Tennis Association and All England Lawn Tennis Club, members of the International Tennis Federation that set standards, kept a stranglehold on official tennis tournaments, as they were the ones to define them. Although professionalism expanded with rogue exhibition tours, these lacked the prestige and competitiveness of the ITF sanctioned events. Players like Lenglen, who abandoned their amateur status, were chastised for sullyng the sport by making economic choices about their future. She was blunt about the discriminatory effects of amateurism and recognized the purpose: “Under these absurd and antiquated amateur rulings, only a wealthy person can compete, and the fact of the matter is that only wealthy people *do* compete. Is

⁴⁸ King and Starr, 24.

⁴⁹ King and Starr, 24.

⁵⁰ King and Starr, 26, 40.

that fair? Does it advance the sport? Does it make tennis more popular—or does it tend to suppress and hinder an enormous amount of tennis talent lying dormant in the bodies of young men and women whose name are not in the social register?”⁵¹ In fact, at a recreational, local level, tennis did grow in popularity and public courts were being built. These made the sport more accessible and competitive in recreational leagues, but the cost of travel for tournaments put the brakes on young talents trying to rise up. One particular player, Althea Gibson, stands out in tennis memory as a symbol for the destructive power of amateurism.

In 1957, Gibson became the first person of color to win Wimbledon. In 2003, she passed away holding five Grand Slam titles, living in relative obscurity, and having faced abject poverty and suicidal ideation after her retirement. The amateur rule of tennis forced her to retire early when she could no longer find travel funds to compete. She was born to sharecroppers in South Carolina and was raised in Harlem. There, in 1930s and 40s, she began boxing and playing stickball before discovering a talent for paddle tennis on improvised courts on the streets. Her early support came from Black tennis clubs, in which she faced discrimination for her working-class background. Surrounded by Harlem’s Black elite, her lack of formal education and stated disdain for rules and authority of any kind marked her difference. At an all-Black tennis tournament in 1946, doctors Hubert Eaton and Robert Johnson, remembered as the godfathers of Black tennis, scouted her with a vision to make her the sport’s Jackie Robinson and break the color line. They trained Gibson in

⁵¹ King and Starr, 41.

residential programs where they also housed her and worked aggressively to teach her bourgeois etiquette.⁵²

In 1950, Gibson attempted to enter the national championship at Forest Hills, but her application was dismissed. Alice Marble, a prominent white woman player, pushed the USTA toward inclusion in a public letter and organization changed its position, permitting her entry as the first black player in a Grand Slam tournament. Although she did not make it past the first round that year, she showed tremendous talent and athleticism, the precedent of her entry allowed her to play more prestigious tournaments internationally and her early benefactors helped bankroll her schedule. However, that funding eventually dried up after years of touring successfully and winning top tournaments. Her success in tennis was not enough to sustain her career in it. Unable to continue funding her travels to compete, she retired in 1958 with five Grand Slam singles titles. She made money recording jazz albums and doing trick shots on tour with the Harlem Globetrotters, slowly fading into obscurity.⁵³

In 1995, Gibson called her former doubles partner, a British Jewish woman, Angela Buxton to say goodbye; Gibson explained she could no longer pay for her rent, food, and medications and was not able to keep going. Buxton wired funds to keep Gibson in her home for a while longer and published a letter in *Tennis Week* magazine. The letter explained Gibson's contributions to the sport and the way she was wronged by amateur rules and an unsympathetic fandom. In response, people from all over the world sent money to Gibson. The gifts amounted to nearly one million dollars and sustained her until she passed

⁵² Jurejko, "Althea Gibson"; Gibson, *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody*; Gray and Lamb, *Born to Win*.

⁵³ Jurejko, "Althea Gibson"; Gibson, *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody*; Gray and Lamb, *Born to Win*.

away from a respiratory illness in 2003.⁵⁴ Gibson's untimely retirement forced by financial barriers was elicited a decade later when the next generation of women's players fought for professionalization.

Billy Jean King first began to advocate for the creation of a women's professional tennis tour in the sixties. The men's tennis circuit had professionalized in 1968. In September of 1970, King organized nine women to take a risky, pivotal step toward professionalization. Billie Jean King, Rosie Casals, Nancy Richey, Judy Dalton, Kerry Melville Reid, Julie Heldman, Peaches Bartkowicz, Kristy Pigeon, and Valerie Ziegenfuss each accepted a one-dollar payment. The Original 9, as they are immortalized as in tennis, each signed a contract to play the Virginia Slims Invitational and accepted payment from Gladys Heldman—a businesswoman with diverse portfolio including tennis publishing. By accepting money to play tennis, they broke the amateur rule of the US Lawn Tennis Association and risked losing all their ranking points and Grand Slam eligibility. In 1971, an official for the USLTA told *The New York Times*, “Women's Lib may be fine along Fifth Avenue, but Women's Lob, as the new professional tennis tour has become known, will not dictate policy to the United States Lawn Tennis Association.”⁵⁵ In this rogue era, where women players were still participating in Grand Slams under a constant threat of being banned, the women worked hard to forge a path no other women's sport had managed. *The New York Times* reported:

Women's tennis, once known more for frilly fashions than crosscourt forehand and flat first serves, is achieving unparalleled growth, identity and unity as a professional sport. After a decade of laboring in the shadows of

⁵⁴ Jurejko, “Althea Gibson”; Gibson, *I Always Wanted to Be Somebody*; Gray and Lamb, *Born to Win*.

⁵⁵ Gibbs, “What the WTA's Road from \$1 Contracts to \$4.4 Million Paydays Teaches Other Women's Sports.”

their chauvinistic male counterparts, the women have formed their own prize-money circuit this year with attractive corporate sponsorship, curiously interested crowds and the typical growing pains that accompany the administration of any professional sport [...] Effective organization and the ability to establish an identity has stunned skeptics, who thought such independence and unity was impossibly in tennis. Some males still cannot understand why anyone would pay to watch a women's tennis match.⁵⁶

After a few successful years on a small professional circuit organized by Heldman and funded by Virginia Slims cigarettes, the WTA was officially founded in 1973.⁵⁷

Three months after forming the WTA, King got unprecedented media coverage when she played retired men's player Bobby Riggs in a nationally televised tennis match that promoters referred to as the "Battle of the Sexes."⁵⁸ The event remains the highest rated tennis match in U.S. television history.⁵⁹ King, an outspoken feminist, who has described herself as an activist first and athlete second, beat Riggs, the self-proclaimed "male chauvinist pig," with three straight sets in a best of five set match. She took home \$100,000 in prize money from the exhibition match, which was four times as much as Margaret Court had earned winning the women's singles title at the US Open a month prior. Speaking to the enduring impact of that match and surrounding story, it was made in to a \$25M film in 2017, featuring Emma Stone and Steve Carrell, who earned Golden Globe nominations for Best Actress and Best Actor. The movie carried the tagline: "He made a bet. She made history."⁶⁰ The exhibition match and the media circus around it were a major step because the WTA

⁵⁶ Gibbs.

⁵⁷ For more on this era of women's tennis, see Ware, *Game, Set, Match.*, King and Starr, *We Have Come a Long Way.*, and Lichtenstein, *A Long Way, Baby.*

⁵⁸ Ware, *Game, Set, Match.*

⁵⁹ Tignor, "1973."

⁶⁰ "Battle of the Sexes (2017)."

could successfully pressure the Grand Slams, which previously only allowed amateurs to compete, to become “opens” and include professionals as well. It showed the viability of women’s professional tennis.

Aside from a few occasional notes, this dissertation concerns itself with the open era when tennis became paid labor. The legacy sketched out in this pre-history, however, provides the context for what women’s tennis is today. The elite circuit, then and now, is molded by a global fan base and a handful of strong personalities. Although the sport’s history is one of exclusion on the grounds of class, race, and wealth, there have always been women who pushed back against those discriminatory institutions and used their various privileges to open up the sport to all participants. Although there is still significant progress to be made toward equity, I found it necessary to show how tennis came as far as it has already.

Chapter 1

We Have a Long Way to Go, Baby:

Defining the Labor of Professional Athlete in the Fight for Equal Pay

There is an illusion of gender equality in professional tennis. To the casual observer, tennis can seem like a model of feminist achievements in sports—a group of women athletes formed an organization that has equal footing with men on the sport’s largest stages. On the surface, it appears that the issue of equal pay has been resolved and women have won. Even the Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) website boasts it is “the global leader in women’s professional sport with more than 2,500 players representing 100 nations competing for a record \$164 million in prize money.”⁶¹ Since 2007, all four Grand Slams have offered the men’s and women’s singles winner equal pay and popular media accept this grand narrative of gender parity. A 2016 PBS NewsHour headline reads, “Equal Pay for Equal Play: What the sport of tennis got right.”⁶² In 2019, the WTA announced its year end championships in Shenzhen, China, would offer the highest prize money of any tennis tournament ever played. If a winner of the round robin event were to go undefeated, she would take home \$4.75 million dollars. The prize for the men’s equivalent tournament, the ATP Finals, was capped at \$2.7 million.⁶³ The marquee events show women earning as much as—and in one case more than the men—but away from the spotlight and primetime television tournaments, pay inequality by gender is widespread. On the professional tours’ calendars that span nearly

⁶¹ “About the WTA.”

⁶² Barajas, “Equal Pay for Equal Play. What the Sport of Tennis Got Right”; Popovich, “Battle of the Sexes.”

eleven months, women players typically only earn about 80 cents in prize money for every dollar that the men do.⁶⁴ There is greater gendered pay disparity at the lower levels: 336 men can earn enough money just from playing to cover the expenses associated with touring, while only 253 women are in a position to do so.⁶⁵

When women, as individuals or a collective, make demands for equal prize money they are met with resistance from powerful men in the sport. In 2018, Spaniard Rafael Nadal, one of the most popular and successful men's players in the current era, told an Italian magazine, "Female models earn more than male models, and nobody says anything. Why? Because they have a larger following. In tennis, too, who gathers a larger audience earns more."⁶⁶ Two years previously, Ion Tiriac, the Romanian billionaire and owner of the Madrid Open, told a reporter, "saying that [men's and women's players] are equal — they're not equal. I prefer a woman on the court, they are beautiful on the court. Even Federer, who is very elegant, I prefer an elegant woman, not Mr. Federer. But they are not bringing to the table the same thing."⁶⁷ The same year, top player, Serbian Novak Djokovic, told reporters that "Stats are showing that we have much more spectators on the men's tennis matches. I think that's one of the reasons why maybe we should get awarded more."⁶⁸ He did not cite those statistics and stopped short of listing the other reasons he thinks men should be paid

⁶³ Clarke, "Eyes on a Record-Breaking Prize at the WTA Finals."

⁶⁴ Rothenberg, "Roger Federer, \$731,000; Serena Williams, \$495,000."

⁶⁵ Benjamin, "Rafael Nadal Says Women Tennis Players Shouldn't Be Paid Equally If TV Ratings Aren't Equal."

⁶⁶ Benjamin.

⁶⁷ Rothenberg, "Ion Tiriac, Madrid Open's Owner, Has Views on Women's Pay, and Legs."

⁶⁸ France-Presse, "Djokovic Says He Supports Equal Prizes."

more. The sentiment that men's labor in tennis is more valuable is persistent under the surface, and on the rare occasions that a top man verbalizes it, there is strong resistance from current and retired women players. WTA founder Billie Jean King remains one of the most vocal advocates for women.

Pursuing the work she started fifty years ago, King continues to move the conversation and push for equal pay. After Djokovic made the comment that men should earn more, King and Chris Evert summoned him to a 30-minute private meeting.⁶⁹ He later issued an apology on social media, saying, "I don't make any difference between the genders. I am for equality in the sport."⁷⁰ This statement was apparently motivated not only by the meeting with King and Evert, but also a response to private messages from Serena Williams and the Scottish ATP player, Andy Murray. Previously, Murray had been quick to tell reporters, "I think there should be equal pay, 100."⁷¹ Decades after tennis entered the open era to allow players to earn money, the role of gender in distributing the sport's revenue remains contested.⁷²

In this chapter, I analyze public debates around equal pay in tennis prize money to argue that uncertainty about how the work of the professional athlete is conceived of has become a significant hindrance in closing the gender gap. When equal pay is debated among fans, press, and officials, there are a series of talking points that opponents of equal pay present that suggest that the prize money rewards something more complex than just

⁶⁹ For more about King and Evert's work in the WTA, see the pre-history in the Introduction.

⁷⁰ France-Presse, "Djokovic Says He Supports Equal Prizes."

⁷¹ Rothenberg, "Anger After Official Says WTA Players Ride on 'Coattails' of Men."

⁷² In the Introduction, I presented the history of the original fight for professionalization of women's tennis.

winning.⁷³ People opposed to equal pay typically begin by pointing to the higher intensity of the men’s game as “more work.” Often, they claim differences in ticket sales and television deals justify higher compensation for men, regardless of compelling evidence that this is not accurate and it would suggest players work for what amounts to a sales commission. The apparent ambiguity about what metric to use in debating compensation exposes an uncertainty in what the players are being paid *to do*—play the best tennis or attract the most viewers.

Publicly posted comments on a 2016 *New York Times* article about gender inequality in tennis provide a glimpse into how this uncertainty figures into discussions among fans. The first comment is from Gary in Australia, who starts the conversation: “If women are underpaid it is - correctly - all about equal pay for equal work. Not here though. I like Serena and the many talented women tennis players, but why does a 3 set match mean equal work with a 5 set match?”⁷⁴ The first reply comes from MAD in Westchester, NY, who accepts the premise that the work of tennis corresponds to match length, and promises that “the female tennis players would have no problem playing five-set matches.” MAD’s suggestion is that women are not given equal opportunity to show they will work just as much. T-puppy of Brooklyn points out those points are moot, since the article they are commenting on clearly explained that the Grand Slams are the only tournaments where men play five sets and they were the first ones to have offered equal prize money. James S. Biggs of Washington, DC weighed in with his perspective, bluntly echoing a sentiment shared by

⁷³ I am interested not in endorsement and sponsorship deals, but rather in the moneys paid directly to the athletes by their sport’s governing bodies. Sponsorship contracts are generally not disclosed and therefore are difficult to analyze. A comparison of Forbes earning estimates for men and women players, however, suggests that the men earn significantly higher endorsement (Badenhausen 2019) (“The World’s Highest-Paid Athletes List” n.d.).

⁷⁴ Rothenberg, “Roger Federer, \$731,000; Serena Williams, \$495,000.”

Tiriac: “The issue here is that men’s tennis is just a superior product in that they are simply better players, facing stiffer competition and often play significantly longer matches (five sets versus three sets). It may not seem ‘fair,’ but it's just a fact of life that some people are bigger, strong, faster, and they are rewarded more richly for that.” KenG of Santa Barbara, CA adds another common talking point: “The article does not mention how much revenue is generated by TV contracts for the men’s and women’s tournaments. TV contracts are a huge source of income for all sports, and if they generate less revenue for female tennis players, there will be less money to pay them.” Joe from New York wrote, “Athletes are the sales people of their respective world, and rarely in the business world are sales people compensated without regard for the revenue they help generate.” This is only a small sample of the 719 comments the article received, but it represents a series of arguments that get repeated time and again in comments sections, online forums, and Twitter threads. Much of the discussion pivots on fundamental disagreement about what tennis players are paid to do.

I argue that tennis players’ labor is affective and commodified as entertainment: their product is the ephemeral match and the feelings elicited in fans. The production of affect is an integral part of the tennis professional’s work because it creates the sport’s value as entertainment. In affective economies, feminist scholar Sara Ahmed argues, “emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities.”⁷⁵ In sports, emotions make people buy tickets; emotions drive traffic to online publications by motivating people to click links with stories about players they care about. Fans buy tickets hoping to see players they like or simply because the sport brings them joy, catharsis, and opportunities to connect with people. Feelings about tennis and players are essential for the monetization of the sport. As

⁷⁵ Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 119.

philosopher Roland Barthes explained, discussing why people passionately care about sports, “To watch, here, is not only to live, to suffer, to hope, to understand [...] Ultimately, man knows certain forces, certain conflicts, joys and agonies: sport expresses them, liberates them, consumes them without ever letting anything be destroyed.”⁷⁶ The athlete’s job, through performing sport, is to liberate these affects in the spectators.

Playing tournaments produces affect that stick to the player and makes their presence at the next tournament more valuable through the tour’s circulation. Ahmed uses the term “stick” to describe the movement of emotions between surfaces of bodies and signs to emphasize the sideways motion and attachment of affect. In Ahmed’s terms, “affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity but is produced only as an effect of its circulation.”⁷⁷ For example, when Gatorade sponsors a player like Serena Williams, they pay her to attach the positive feelings fans have about her to their product in hopes fans will develop positive feelings about the sports beverage. Accumulating more ranking points, prestige, and prize money is achieved alongside the accumulation of the viewers’ passion as players receive more television screen time.

Drawing on Marxist theory, I argue that professional tennis players are not simply the laborers of tennis but also the objects, signs, and commodities that circulate in the global economy. Karl Marx posited that a defining characteristic of capitalist economies is that surplus value is created through circulation: “movement converts [value] into capital.”⁷⁸ Ahmed applies this principle to affective economies where affect is accumulated through

⁷⁶ Barthes, *What Is Sport?*, 60–61.

⁷⁷ Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 120.

⁷⁸ Ahmed, 120.

circulation of signs and bodies. Players build their surplus affective value by playing matches all over the world and appearing on television and social media, which returns financial capital to the players and also to the tournaments and brands they are associated with.

Affect has another critical function in the remuneration of tennis, which is that feelings about the value of men's and women's labor impact prize money allocation despite significant flaws in the justification. In the equal pay debate in tennis, sexism functions as a fundamental affect that makes people gloss over evidence that shows the equal worth of women. An affective attachment to men's dominance in sports has created an "epistemology of ignorance" that prevents a significant amount of people from recognizing the value of women's tennis. Charles Mills describes ignorance as both "false belief and the absence of a true belief."⁷⁹ Ignorance here is based in part on the false belief that professional tennis reached gender parity in 2006 when Wimbledon became the last Grand Slam to offer equal pay. The arguments about equal pay since then have largely been framed, as shown in the online discussion above, about the value of the work and how men's work in tennis is different.

To demonstrate why equal pay across gender is the only form of fair and equitable pay for professional tennis, I first examine the tournament categorization structures used by the WTA and the ATP men's tour. This serves to show how, despite popular belief, there are still major differences in how men's and women's labor in tennis is valued. After explicating the mechanisms by which pay is made unequal, I analyze the arguments that some men's

⁷⁹ Mills, "White Ignorance," 16.

players, officials, and fans make to justify the unequal pay. Throughout, I analyze the ways that affect structures beliefs and discourses on this topic.

This chapter title plays on the corporate model of women's liberation that applauds incremental progress toward equality. "You've Come a Long Way, Baby" was the slogan for Philip Morris's Virginia Slims, the first cigarette brand marketed explicitly to women. Launched in 1968, it played on the messages of the women's liberation movement to find a market. In 1970, the Virginia Slims sponsorship of women's professional tennis was vital in creating the modern professional circuit and their slogan became a rallying cry for women in tennis to celebrate how far they had come by creating a self-sufficient professional circuit.⁸⁰ However, looking closely at the state of tennis today, it is apparent that the work is not done. Pay discrepancies persist at all levels of professional tennis, and we still have a long way to go, Baby.

Pay Is Unequal and Inequitable

Different organizational structures of the ATP and WTA tours are instrumental in perpetuating the myth that differences in pay between men and women is justified. Sanctions are a licensing contract between a tournament and the tour. Generally, the ATP and WTA tours negotiate prize money and sanctions directly with tournaments, independently from one another. As a result of divergent structures and negotiating powers, it appears difficult to compare pay outside of the four Grand Slam tournaments. In the words of *New York Times* reporter Ben Rothenberg, "organizers cite a technicality in the WTA's

⁸⁰ For example, Billie Jean King's 1988 book about the history of women's tennis is titled *We Have Come a Long Way* and journalist Grace Lichtenstein's book is *A Long Way, Baby*, published in 1974 after she spent a year travelling with the Virginia Slims circuit.

structure to justify the pay differential.”⁸¹ To understand that technicality and how it used to justify inequality requires a detailed understanding of the underlying structures of professional tennis. I demonstrate that men’s labor in tennis is favored over women’s labor in a manner that is disproportionate to what the sanction system can account for.

The ATP and WTA act as individual craft unions, representing a group of skilled laborers whose work is delegated to tournaments. Craft unions define who is a tennis player and negotiate with tournaments to contract out the qualified tennis players and set standards for working conditions. According to economists Michael A. Leeds and Peter von Allmen, the tennis tours are different from other sports leagues because the ATP and WTA negotiate with individual tournaments, rather than acting as a unified league like players unions dealing with the National Football League (NFL). This aligns their purpose with craft unions, such as construction unions, who make agreements with developers.⁸² These parallels are important to grasping the relationship between players and the entities that pay them.

The sanction outlines the responsibilities the tour and tournament have to each other. The WTA tournament sanction determines the player pool the event hosts are entitled to. For example, tournaments with a Premier Mandatory sanction are promised all of the top-ten ranked players will compete. If the WTA fails to deliver this number, the organization pays a fine to that tournament. Suppose only eight of the top ten players competed at Indian Wells, the WTA would have to pay that tournament \$250,000 for failure to deliver the quality of labor agreed to when awarding the sanction. In exchange, the tournament agrees

⁸¹ Rothenberg, “Roger Federer, \$731,000; Serena Williams, \$495,000.”

⁸² Leeds and Von Allmen, *The Economics of Sports*.

to a wide range of rules, such as and printing WTA logos on press room backdrops and guaranteeing the WTA eight VIP parking spots staff and players. At all joint ATP and WTA tournaments, it is stipulated that the host “shall provide a level of WTA branding which is equal to or greater than the branding provided for the ATP as determined by the WTA.”⁸³ For instance, the tournament programs sold to fans at the BNP Paribas Open in Indian Wells have both tours’ logos printed on the cover in the same size.

Like construction unions, the tours also drive up the pay by controlling the labor market. In other words, any ordinary tennis club can host an open tournament, but by making a contract with the WTA or ATP, a host is promised a certain amount of highly skilled laborers to perform the work of tennis. Leeds and von Allmen further explain that “the ATP and WTA do not specify how much tournaments pay specific players. They do, however, establish the reward structure of the tournaments, so all players know what they will earn from a particular outcome.”⁸⁴ The tournaments may not promise a specific player a certain reward, but the prize money allocation is specified ahead of time and available to whichever player achieves certain outcomes, such as reaching the semi-finals.

In addition to determining aspects of pay, sanctions also outline the distribution of ranking points according to outcome. The ranking points for the previous twelve months are added to determine a player’s spot on the world ranking list. For example, Indian Wells is sanctioned as a Premier Mandatory event for women and a Masters 1000 for men; this means both singles winners get 1,000 points toward their ranking. The Southern and Western Open in Cincinnati is a Masters 1000 for the men as well, but it is sanctioned as a

⁸³ 2020 WTA Official Rulebook, 223.

⁸⁴ Leeds and Von Allmen, *The Economics of Sports*.

Premier 5 for women. In this case, the women’s winner earns 900 points compared to the men’s 1,000. Players get a certain number of points for each round they reach in the tournament, so that losing in the final of Wimbledon is worth more points than winning a Premier Mandatory like Indian Wells. The apples and oranges difference between the sanctions at various tournaments leads many fans, media, and players to believe that unequal prize money can be equitable or fair if the sanctions are unequal.

Professional tennis tournament levels

Tournament level [number of tournaments]	ATP Points	WTA Points
Grand Slams [4]	2,000	2,000
Tour finals [1]	1,500	1,500
ATP Masters 1000 [9] and WTA Premier Mandatory [4]	1,000	1,000
WTA Premier 5 [5]	NA	900
ATP World Tour 500 [13]	500	NA
WTA Premier [12]	NA	470
WTA International [32]	NA	280
ATP International [40]	250	NA
Total points allocated to tournament winners each season	35,000	32,600

The different sanction systems on the ATP and WTA tours are evoked to foreclose further discussion about unequal pay by gender. Venus Williams, one of the most successful women in tennis history and vocal advocate for equal prize money at Grand Slams in the aughts, believes the difference in sanctions across tournaments justifies the difference in prize money. At Indian Wells press conference in 2018, I asked Williams about the discrepancies:

Stahl: You have done so much for equal pay at a Grand Slam level. Wondering where you see the fight for equal pay now, lower down on the tour levels, what you think needs to happen for women's equality.

V. Williams: I believe we have equal pay at all the tournaments; is that correct? Isn't this tournament equal pay? Or no?

Stahl: This one is, but Cincy, something like 60 cents on the dollar that the women make on the men.

V. Williams: I think the difference between—are they two different tiers or something? I don't really know the men's tour that well. I really can't speak to it. But I believe is that a 1000 event for them and ours is a different level? And where there is only so many sanctions. So, in [Indian Wells], we do have equal prize money and other places you're dealing with two different sanctions.⁸⁵

Venus Williams' statement reveals that she believes that there is equal pay at all tournaments and any difference can be justified by variations in sanctions. As a legend in the sport who is credited with advancing equal pay at the top level, Williams' public lack of concern for continuing the fight past the sanction argument signals to media, fans, and other players, that the fight is over and equality has been reached. Further, she implies that the two sanction systems cannot be likened.

But there are ways to analyze the sanctions and create valid comparisons between the ATP and WTA contracts by considering how prize money rewards correlate with ranking points. My analysis of player records and tournament guides shows that per point, outside of the grand slams, men earn significantly more than women. In 2019, the top-ten ATP players collectively earned \$75.38M in prize money and 53.8k ranking points, while the top-ten WTA players collectively earned \$59.18M and 52.7k ranking points. Per point, the men players earned \$1,228, while the women players earned \$803.⁸⁶ The discrepancy grows with

⁸⁵ Williams, BNP Paribas Open Press Conference, March 13, 2018.

⁸⁶ See appendix III for full breakdown of 2019 Top 10 players accumulated points and prize money.

a drop in the ranking point value of a tournament, meaning that the less visible labor, the less popular and known players, face higher rates of gender discrimination. This allows for the perpetuation of the illusion that there is equality.

Consider the total difference of just three joint men's and women's tournaments in the U.S.: Indian Wells, Cincinnati, and Washington, DC. If one woman were to win all three tournaments, she would have earned \$1,941,510 and 2,180 points toward her ranking. If a man won all the same tournaments, he would have earned 320 points and \$892,115 more than her. For every point the man earned, the woman would have earned 87. For every dollar he earned, she would have earned \$0.69.⁸⁷ However, those players who only reach modest success at the lower tier, less competitive tournaments like in Washington face higher discrimination than the top-ten players who can take advantage of the equal pay at the top events.

Player rankings are a vital component in the justification of pay disparity by tournament tier. Sanctions promise tournaments a certain number of players of specific rank distribution—laborers of a particular skill level—will compete at any given tournament. When people argue that different sanctions for men and women at one tournament justifies a difference in pay, a part of that argument is that the anticipated player pool is going to be significantly different. For instance, in Cincinnati, the “different sanctions” argument voiced by Williams and others suggests that there will be more top tier men than women, therefore, setting the prize money higher for men is justified because the men “work harder” to win and draw in more fans with their star power.

⁸⁷ For a full breakdown of point and pay discrepancies at joint tournaments in 2019, see Appendix I.

The ATP has an annual list of “commitment players.” Each player ranked in the year-end top thirty is automatically committed to play a certain number of events at each tier in the following year or risk fines. They are required to play all four Grand Slams, eight Masters 1000 tournaments, and any four 500 level events. Still, there are numerous exceptions. Players can deduct one Masters 1000 tournament from their commitment once they turn 30, one for having served the tour for 12 years, and one once they have played 600 total matches. As a result, many of the top players, like Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal, can and generally do, strike three events from their requirement. This allows them to focus their energy on tournaments with higher pay and reduce injury risk from over playing.

On the WTA, all players are considered commitment players. As the result of a 2020 rule change, the WTA went from having a top-ten player commitment list to requiring all players enter a certain number of tournaments at each tier, provided they are eligible. Tournaments have different requires for entry, but typically recent ranking results, such as from the previous few months are the primary consideration. In some cases, players are awarded wild cards to gain entry when they are not otherwise eligible, such as when Serena Williams returned from maternity leave, which the rules treat like a prolonged absence for injury or illness, and did not have recent points to gain automatic entry. Players who follow the rules and play as many tournaments as expected are awarded by being placed in a bonus pool to earn extra money at the end of the year. According to the new rules, all WTA players must play any Premier Mandatory event they gain entry to, four of the Premier 5 events, and two of twelve Premier level tournaments. Players over 34 years will not be penalized for

missing Premier or Premier 5 tournaments, under the “Years of Service Rule.” Others will receive a “zero point” to their ranking calculation.⁸⁸

Agreements between tournament organizers and the tour administrations that promise players based on rank assumes that higher ranked players will play better matches and have the star-power to deliver bigger audiences to the stadiums and TV broadcasters. In the craft union model, they are the workers with the most valuable labor, in part because they have most honed their craft. Further, the concept assumes that player rank corresponds, at least to some extent, with how many fans and viewers they can deliver by featuring exciting, competitive matches. Analyzing the actual field of players on both tours, however, suggests that the women’s tour should produce more competitive matches because there is less of a drop-off in the records between the higher and lower ranked players.

The significant gap between the two top men’s players and the rest of the field indicates a lack of depth on the tour and signals more predictable matches than the women’s field. The top 30 men and women have similar number of wins on their records at the end of the season, but the wins are distributed much more to the top on the men’s side and more spread out among the women.⁸⁹ My analysis of the ranking point distribution on the ATP and WTA reveals that the women’s tour has much more depth in the top-30 players than the men, meaning the gap in the performance level between the no. 1 and no. 30 women players is much slimmer than for the equivalent men. The top man wins much more than the one

⁸⁸ Nguyen, “Player Health and Transparency Highlight WTA 2020 Rule Changes.”

⁸⁹ In mathematical terms, ATP top-30 players ended the 2016 season with a standard deviation of 2,688 points. The WTA top-30 standard deviation was only 1,811 point. This means that the top-30 players on the WTA are statistically more competitive than their ATP counterparts. In other words, the product delivered by the 20-30 ranked women is comparatively better than 20-30 ranked men, when looked at next to the number 1 player. At the end of 2017, the ATP top-10 players ranged from 2,610-10,650 points, while the women remained more competitive with a range of 3,260-6,180 points. The top-ten men players claimed a total of 50,500 points, while the top-ten women players claimed a total of 51,400 points.

ranked at 20 or 30, while on the women's side, the margin between top 30 players is narrower and the outcome in their matchups less predictable. In 2016, the average year-end top-30 player on the ATP tour had roughly 3,150 points and the average WTA player had 3,250. However, the top two ATP players ended the season with 12,400 and 11,800 points, respectively, while the third ranked ATP player ended the season with fewer than half as many points (5,500). In theory women's matches are more competitive than men's matches and arguably provide more entertainment to many fans, when the outcome is less certain. Mathematically speaking, the sanction system does not create more competitive matches.

Blaming sanctions for inequality does not address the fact that by its own argumentation the structures write inequality into the rules. The underlying assumption is that because women player's work is less important when performed at a lower sanctioned tournament, it is of less value. Their pay should not be equal, because their work is not equal. The claim advanced by players, including Venus Williams, is that because the lower sanctions for women at some tournaments reflect a lower value of work, the work is less valuable, and should therefore be rewarded less, and on these terms pay is unequal. Closely examining the structures of the tours, the purpose and organization of ranking points and prize money, I show that pay in women's tennis is not only unequal, it is not equitable.

The Arguments Against Equal Pay

Opponents of equal pay by gender in tennis typically make the same arguments: 1) men they work better 2) men work more, and 3) men bring in more revenue. According to the first argument, men should be paid more because they are stronger players and could physically overpower the women on court; this argument assumes that compensation should be based on an absolute standard in tests of strength and skill. According to the second

argument, men players play to best out of five sets at Grand Slams, while women players only play best of three; this argument assumes that because women work fewer sets, they do less labor. By this argument, prize money works like a wage for time worked. According to the third argument, men bring more revenue into the sport through ticket sales and TV deals; this argument assumes that the remunerated labor of professional tennis is the production and sale of entertainment. Each argument rests on different conceptions of what the compensation of professional tennis is in fact for as the grounds to assert that women 1) do less work or 2) do less valuable work than men. Each of these arguments can co-exist with the liberal feminist claim for equal pay for equal work, because they define the work that women players do as less than what men do. I consider each of these three arguments in more depth to show how the claim for equal pay in tennis hinges on defining what labor the player performs.

The arguments against equal pay must shift constantly because they are unstable and based on false claims about the sport. In the online tennis fan community, these three arguments play out virtually any time that gender equality is brought up. In the introduction, I cited as example the comments on a *New York Times* article by Ben Rothenberg. For another example, consider an exchange the reporter had with a fan on Twitter. Rothenberg posted attendance numbers from Perth to show that an all men's tournament, the 2020 ATP Cup, which replaced a joint men's and women's tournament, the Hopman Cup, had significant losses in attendance after the change.⁹⁰ Twitter user Adrian Johnson responded, "Manipulated statistic though. Sum the total population (including media coverage and

⁹⁰ Rothenberg, "Anger After Official Says WTA Players Ride on 'Coattails' of Men."

engagement) watching ATP Cup vs Hopman Cup, would be a different story.”⁹¹ Rothenberg responded on Johnson’s terms, pointing out that the “Serena-Federer [mixed doubles match] got infinitely more coverage than anything that happened there this year.”⁹² Abruptly shifting the terms of comparison again, having already shifted from attendance to media coverage, Johnson shifts course to argue about content, responding: “The quality of matches thus far have been superior to most at Hopman Cup.”⁹³ When user Sambatea asked him, “How did you measure ‘quality of matches’? Pure fantasy,”⁹⁴ Johnson responds by listing matches between top ranked men without stating what makes these better. Sambatea does not accept the list as proving superior quality and claims increased attendance and media coverage for Hopman Cup proves it was more interesting. Johnson pivots again, to say viewership is the right metric and refers to the events’ online broadcasters, claiming “Hopman Cup has never been covered by @atptour or @TennisTV, which means the @ATPCup has clearly had more viewership.”⁹⁵ This pivot back to viewership as metric does not account for the spectator numbers Rothenberg started the conversation with. In fact, Johnson actually suggests that total viewership is largely dependent on broadcasting choices and rights, independently of the actual quality of matches or fan interest. Adrian Johnson’s circular argument, in which he refuses to engage fully with logical arguments by repeatedly moving the goal posts, relies on a fundamental refusal to name clear metrics that could explain what prize money might be fairly based on. Below, I analyze the individual

⁹¹ Johnson, “Manipulated Statistic.”

⁹² Rothenberg, “Roger Federer, \$731,000; Serena Williams, \$495,000.”

⁹³ Johnson, “The Quality of Matches.”

⁹⁴ Sambatea, “How Did You Measure.”

⁹⁵ Johnson, “Hopman Cup.”

arguments made by people, like Johnson, who push back against equal pay by gender in tennis.

The “Men Are Better at Tennis” Argument

The most common claim is that men should earn more than women, because men are better at tennis than women. If tennis prize money were awarded to the player who can beat everybody else, it would follow that a single, neutral gender tour would be more sensible. The fact that there are two commercially successful tours shows that there is a market for women’s tennis that is recognized in itself for something beyond a display of who can beat the most people at tennis.

I do not dispute the premise that top men players, at their best, could handily beat top women in their prime, but that does not make one more valuable than the other from a spectator perspective. Serena Williams said, “For me, men’s tennis and women’s tennis are completely, almost, two separate sports. If I were to play Andy Murray, I would lose 6-0, 6-0 in five to six minutes, maybe 10 minutes.”⁹⁶ Murray, an ardent supporter of women in tennis, had expressed a similar sentiment, saying “for me they’re two different sports.” Murray has said he prefers watching women’s tennis when he wants to relax and not feel like he’s scouting opponents. His favorite WTA player at the time of the interview was Agnieszka Radwańska and his explanation for why shows the added value of women’s tennis, even if it can lack the physicality of the ATP game: “I like watching her play just because a lot of the girls that she’s competing with are a lot bigger and stronger than her,

⁹⁶ Rhodan, “John McEnroe: Serena Williams Would Rank 700 Among Men.”

and she just plays with variety.”⁹⁷ He specifically enjoys watching her play because she is not the strongest, but because of the artful game she developed to compete with more physical and conventionally athletic players. Murray sees a distinct value in women’s tennis and enjoys watching it, even though there is arguably nobody in women’s tennis he could not routinely beat. He respects women’s tennis as its own, separate entity of equal value to men’s.

Superior strength and speed do not mean that men produce a better, more entertaining, or more compelling competition, as boxing organizations have long acknowledged with a weight class system.⁹⁸ In boxing, lower weight class competitors routinely bring in more revenue and earn significantly more money than heavyweights who could beat them in the ring.⁹⁹ Floyd Mayweather, the highest earner in the sport’s history, started his career as super featherweight and never competed above welterweight. Oscar De La Hoya and Manny Pacquiao, the third and fourth top earners in boxing history, also never competed in the heavyweight classes. Weight class divisions create a level playing field for competitors with different physical advantages—mass, speed, or agility—to compete at the sport’s highest level and prevent the domination of the strongest fighters.

Gender segregation in sports, though fraught with complications and limitations, create a space for talented athletes to showcase their skills that may not match the power of the strongest player’s game. Boxing promoters and fans understand the sport as not purely about force, but about a balance with skill and art. As Billie Jean King said, “Sugar Ray

⁹⁷ Rothenberg, “Conversations With Andy Murray.”

⁹⁸ McCarson, “Breaking Down Each Boxing Weight Class.”

⁹⁹ Donovan, “Forbes World’s Highest-Paid Athletes: Breaking Down Boxer Ranks.”

Leonard probably could not have beaten heavyweights when he was the Number 1 middleweight, but he was still thrilling to watch.”¹⁰⁰ Similarly, tennis—a sport writer David Foster Wallace called “chess on the run”—requires much more than athleticism or strength.¹⁰¹ The ability of an ATP player to beat a WTA player does not signal an absolute superiority in tennis skills any more than a low ranked heavyweight knocking out a top featherweight means he is an essentially “better” boxer.

The game play of professional tennis has significant differences according to gender and cannot be collapsed into the role of strength or pace more commonly associated with men’s tennis. The emphasis of men’s tennis is on a strong, fast serve designed to end the point without the opponent ever touching the ball. The emphasis of women’s tennis is on a powerful return, designed to put pressure on the server and move her around the court, creating more opportunities for rallies in every point. For audiences, the rallies can present as more entertaining since they create variety. Billie Jean King hypothesized that many recreational tennis players of any gender specifically prefer watching professional women’s tennis because of the slower pace that leads to longer rallies and can build more drama.¹⁰² Recreational players, she suggested, might view watching women’s tennis as an opportunity to think through their own game and observe techniques more carefully.

People in the tennis community, like those in the news forums and Twitter threads cited, who argue that men should earn more because they can beat women, have a simplistic view of tennis that does not consider affective value. They fail to account for what can make

¹⁰⁰ King and Starr, *We Have Come a Long Way*, 120.

¹⁰¹ Wallace and Sullivan, *String Theory*, 8.

¹⁰² King and Starr, *We Have Come a Long Way*, 120.

the sport special, playing down artistry, finesse, and strategy as what make a player great. Those skills that women can possess in equal measure to men, are components of what makes tennis, or frankly any sport, entertaining. Feelings like excitement, suspense, admiration, and wonder are produced in women's matches, regardless of the fact that if Andy Murray could ever enter a WTA tournament, he would be the clear favorite. From his expert perspective, the underdog drama and artistry that Radwanska plays with make her labor as valuable as his.

The “Men Play More Longer Matches” Argument

The second argument against equal pay claims that players on the men's tour work more than women players. At Grand Slam tournaments, the men play best out of five sets at Grand Slam while the women players only play best out of three sets.¹⁰³ In 2016, *Associated Press* sport columnist John Leicester wrote, “Not having women play best-of-five-set matches, like men, at major tournaments is core to tennis' equality problem, because it

¹⁰³ In the seven round, single elimination tournaments that starts with 128 men and 128 women in the main draw, men play best of five matches and women play best of three; men play between three and five sets of tennis in each match whereas women play two or three sets. All Grand Slams have had best of five set matches for men and best of three for women since being institutionalized as the four major tournaments in 1924. The Australian Open was played by men only from 1905, until women joined in 1922. Wimbledon was played by men only from 1877, until women joined in 1884. The US Open was played by men only from 1881, until women joined in 1887. The French Open was played by men only from 1891 (best of five since 1904), until women joined in 1897. Before being united under the ITF, there were differences. The US Open (then the US National Championship) had women play best of five early in their inclusion and the French Open had men playing best of three sets. The WTA Year End Championship played a best of five final from 1984 through 1998. Many men's tournaments also played best of five set finals, such as the Rome Master through 2006. (“Australian Open” n.d.; “French Open” n.d.; “U.S. Open” n.d.; “Wimbledon Championships” n.d.). Discussing protentional reasons for the difference, feminist sportswriter Lindsay Gibbs mused: “There are plenty of theories floating around about why women's tennis players don't play best-of-five. They don't have as strong of serves, meaning they are more easily broken, meaning their three-set matches innately have more drama than men's three-set matches. Women's matches also have historically featured longer rallies than men's matches, though thanks to players like Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic, that's not really the case anymore. Plus, there's the scheduling issue, which is a commonly-cited reason why the precedent isn't changed: It's hard enough scheduling all of these matches at a Slam and getting the TV windows—lengthening women's matches would only make things worse” (Gibbs 2016).

hardwires gender inequality into the sport.”¹⁰⁴ Billie Jean King foresaw this talking point in the early days of professionalized women’s tennis. *The New York Times* reported in 1976 that “[Billie Jean King] and others maintain that the equal pay-equal work principle ‘is bad logic’ and should have no bearing on prize money, since promoters have never requested the women to play longer matches.”¹⁰⁵ In this case, King was understanding “work” to correlate with time spent on court, and feared basing the demand for equal pay on such a premise would kneecap the fight for equal pay from the offset.

The notion that prize money is wage-like compensation for time spent on court cannot reasonably be argued as the foundation of the current prize money structure. Currently, payment is awarded based on how far into a tournament a player advances, regardless of the actual length of the matches. To structure prize money according to the number of sets played would require an entirely new model of the sport. This has significant potential downsides: It could motivate players to deliberately lose sets to prolong matches and would require tournaments to determine prize money after the final match is played. A dominant men’s winner who convincingly won each tournament match in three set victories might earn less than a semi-finalist who played a series of five set matches. This would be an absurd departure from current standards in tennis. If that were the case, it would follow that players should not receive any payment for “walkovers,” when an opponent withdraws from a match, which is currently not the practice.

The five-set argument figured prominently in public debates when Wimbledon remained the last Grand Slam to offer men higher prize money than women until 2006. The

¹⁰⁴ Leicester, “Column.”

¹⁰⁵ Gibbs, “Why Women Don’t Play Best-Of-Five Matches At Grand Slams.”

tournament administrators used the discrepancy in match length as the justification for offering men higher prize money than women. Tim Phillips, chairman of the All England Lawn Tennis Club that runs the tournament, told reporters “the issue is one of a judgement of fairness. We believe that what we do at the moment is actually fair to the men as well as to the women.”¹⁰⁶ He argued that top women were positioned to earn more money, because they were more likely to play in the doubles tournament in addition to singles. The sum of succeeding in singles and doubles meant that in 2005, the year preceding Phillips’ comments, the top ten women earned more from Wimbledon than the top ten men.

Phillips claimed that the singles pay gap was fair because women had shorter and less grueling singles matches, and could therefore play doubles as well, whereas men had to exhaust themselves in singles and could not add doubles to their schedule. Phillips emphasizes gender equity as fairness and posits paying the men’s and women’s champions equally would discriminate against men. Using the traditional language of Wimbledon, referring to “ladies,” he said: “It just doesn’t seem right to us that the lady players could play in three events and could take away significantly more than the men’s champion who battles away through these best-of-five matches.”¹⁰⁷ To earn more than the top man, a woman entering three draws would actually play between six and nine sets for each round, compared to a man who would play between three and five per round.

Phillips’ statements muddle the terms of his argument, at once saying men should earn more because they play more, while also contending that women can earn more by playing additional events that could as much as double their labor with only a modest

¹⁰⁶ “Wimbledon Defiant over Equal Pay.”

¹⁰⁷ “Wimbledon Defiant over Equal Pay.”

increase in pay. By Phillips' reasoning, compensation is neither directly linked to the intensity of matches nor the amount of time spent on court. The prize moneys are tied to an unspecific calculation of how the tournament director imagines players' bodies recover from play and how quickly they can do more work. In this case, it is an admission that women are expected to do more hours of a labor Phillips deems less demanding to earn the same amount as a man doing less work—both men's and women's labors being world class tennis.

In 2006, Venus Williams directly challenged Phillips' by indicating that women players would be willing to play to best of five sets to earn equal pay. She made this claim in an open letter to Wimbledon, which was published in the *Times of London*. Williams maintained, "women players would be happy to play five sets matches in grand slam tournaments. [Phillips] knows this and even acknowledged that women players are capable of this."¹⁰⁸ Williams challenged Phillips to give women the opportunity to work as many hours as the men and earn as much as them. Her rhetorical strategy was an attempt to force the All England Tennis Club to either say it even denies women the mere opportunity to earn the same or admit that the number of sets were not the real reason for inequality to begin with.

Williams argues on the same terms that the quality of the entertainment, specifically its ability to create positive affect, is more significant than the duration of a match. The commodity tournaments sell fans is the affect the players' work produces. She wrote, "Athletes are entertainers; we enjoy huge and equal celebrity and are paid for the value we deliver to broadcasters and spectators, not the amount of time we spend on the stage. And,

¹⁰⁸ Williams, "Wimbledon Has Sent Me a Message: I'm Only a Second Class Champion."

for the record, the ladies' final at Wimbledon in 2005 lasted 45 minutes longer than the men's. No extra charge."¹⁰⁹ Williams also points out that the tournament treats men and women the same otherwise, such as by awarding the same trophy and honorary membership, signaling that to some extent the tournament already recognizes equal value.

In her open letter, Venus Williams, an active member of the elected player council, suggests an expanded view of the tennis players' labor that also includes the labor of training, practice, and professional play needed to reach the highest levels of competition, which in Ahmed's conception is the formation of the surfaces that affect sticks to. Williams wrote, "Wimbledon's stance devalues the principle of meritocracy and diminishes the years of hard work that women on the tour have put into becoming professional tennis players." In this case meritocracy is upheld as the primary value and meaning of a sport. Here, the work of a professional player resides as much in the becoming as the being. She asserts that the work and training that go into reaching the elite status to play Wimbledon are part of what gets compensated by the eventual success. The development of a professional athlete is framed as a form of speculation and investment in human capital. Success at the Grand Slam stage is the return on that investment.

In the year following Williams' letter, Wimbledon became the final Slam to offer equal prize money, presenting their decision as response to a changing landscape. Chairman Philips announced: "This year, taking into account both the overall progression and the fact that broader social factors are also relevant to the decision, [the Committee] have decided that the time is right to bring this subject to a logical conclusion and eliminate the

¹⁰⁹ Williams.

difference.”¹¹⁰ Calling the decision a “logical conclusion” gives it the apolitical weight of acting in a manner in accordance with a good business decision and refuses the political stance of saying it was done because it is ethically the right choice. Phillips stops short of acknowledging that the pay disparity was illogical by suggesting that the circumstances around the issue have changed over time, making inequality only newly illogical. At this point, Prime Minister Tony Blair had even called on the club to offer equal prize money.¹¹¹ Many celebrated the final Grand Slam’s move to equality as an end to inequality in the sport. Larry Scott, head of the WTA at the time, told reporters “[Billie Jean King has] been fighting for this over 30 years. No one fought harder than Billie Jean, and she left me a very nice message saying that she now will look at 2007 as lucky and will always remember this year.” Although it was a major step forward, certainly worth celebrating, women’s tennis still had a long way to go before it can accurately described as equal in terms of gender.

The “Men Bring More Money into the Sport” Argument

The third argument claims that ATP players are better entertainers and therefore bring in more revenue to tournaments that should be rewarded with a bigger cut of the profits than women earn. Such claims are premised on the assumption that the labor of the professional tennis player is the production of entertainment and that generating more revenue for tournaments should translate into higher compensation. According to this argument, because men’s tennis players produce superior tennis, they bring more money into the sport by driving ticket sales, drawing tournament sponsors, and selling television

¹¹⁰ Clarey, “Wimbledon to Pay Women and Men Equal Prize Money.”

¹¹¹ Clarey.

broadcast rights. The complexities of global trends, advertising irregularities, and different ticket sales and television contract deals make this difficult to assess fully. High-profile tournaments include both men and women's tennis players; identifying which group of players is responsible for more ticket sales cannot simply be determined. Rather than reflecting genuine fan preferences, my evidence analyzed below suggests that unacknowledged bias goes into the scheduling and marketing of tennis, favoring men and creating a feedback loop where men's tennis does draw in more revenue as a result of their privileged position. My research suggests that men's matches have higher TV ratings and attendance numbers partly as a result from existing prejudice about the entertainment and marketing value of women's tennis.

I assert that they bring in more money because they are marketed more effectively because of a pre-existing *feeling* that they are more entertaining. Just like women are not given the chance to show they can play five sets, they are not given the same advertising budget and media attention that allows them to build affect. The surplus value is created through circulation, and because women's tennis is "circulated" less in media and the players are given fewer opportunities to build affective attachments with fans, it follows that they would produce less affect. The complication in refuting this argument is splicing the difference between oft conflated men should earn more because they bring in more money or they should earn more because they are more entertaining. The discussions I analyze in more detail below, show that many men who make this claim assume that men bring in more money because they are more entertaining.

To say that men should be paid more because they bring in more revenue than women and produce a more entertaining product, ignores data that shows the popularity of women's tennis. Furthermore, it does not acknowledge the role that tournament marketing

and scheduling play in allowing women to share the entertainment they produce. When women are not promoted the same on TV, they cannot achieve the same ratings, because they are not given a chance. The lower marketing power of women, is itself a product of marketing them less and does not have to indicate they provide an inherently less entertaining product. Tournaments and television scheduling systematically prioritize men's tennis matches, reinforcing in fans a sense that it is the men's matches that are of greater significance, since women's matches being played simultaneously are not foregrounded. When *ESPN* broadcasts the early rounds of a tournament, when there might be matches played on more than five courts simultaneously, the network bounces between different courts to show critical moments of matches as they develop. Content analysis derived from a longitudinal study of *ESPN SportsCenter* coverage of men's and women's sports, showed segments about women were nearly 50% shorter; the segments about women featured fewer graphics, highlight reels, and used language coded as bland and matter of fact, unlike the language used to commentate men's sport that was marked for excitement.¹¹² An analysis of Wimbledon coverage on the UK's national broadcaster BBC in 2015 showed that one day, the network coverage was 93% about men players, over the course of the first of the tournaments two weeks, the coverage was 76% about men. The discrepancy is far greater than what success of British men in that tournament could account for. Despite being promoted significantly less than men's tennis, there are measure by which women's tennis is still more popular.

¹¹² Musto, Cooky, and Messner, "'From Fizzle to Sizzle!' Televised Sports News and the Production of Gender-Bland Sexism."

An attempt to assess preference in the US market has been made by Nielsen in research spanning nearly ten years.¹¹³ Countering the argument that justifies unequal pay according to gender, this research reveals a slim but consistent general preference for women's tennis. Between 2008 and 2017, Nielsen contacted approximately 250,000 Americans over the age of 18 to routinely assess national trends. Extrapolated to the national population, the pollsters found that an average of 6.31 million Americans were "very interested" in men's tennis, compared to an average of 6.65 million for women's tennis. The standard deviation in interest for men is about 430 thousand people, compared to 300 thousand for the women; this indicates that strong interest in the ATP is volatile with greater fluctuations from one season to the next. For advertisers looking at this data, which is Nielsen's market, it suggests greater risk investing in men's tennis, where they can be less confident in the interest, than in the more stable women's tennis.¹¹⁴

Television ratings for US Open finals also suggest that Americans have greater interest in women's than in men's tennis. Domestically, the women's final draws more television viewers. A significant drop in men's and women's viewership happened in 2015, when the broadcast switched from CBS to ESPN, possibly indicating a high number of fans who do not have access to cable television or showing that people watch the sport when it is more easily stumbled upon. For example, the only year in which the men's final had significantly higher ratings than the women's final was 2015, when fan favorite Roger Federer played top player Novak Djokovic, while the women's final was between Flavia

¹¹³ Statista

¹¹⁴ See Appendix IV for full Nielsen preference data.

Panetta and Roberta Vinci.¹¹⁵ This discrepancy in ticket sales and TV ratings shows the precarity of tennis scheduling and the impossibility of anticipating whether the men's or women's matches will bring in more fans and drive more revenue. Overall, the ratings show that Americans are more likely to tune in to a women's Grand Slam final than a men's. To say that men should generally be paid more than women because their product is more entertaining and drives more revenue is not consistent with available evidence.

Men's tennis is prioritized in scheduling, realizing unacknowledged bias rather than fans' preference. The advancements through a tournament draw is a matter of athleticism, skill, and luck—which is to say that tournament officials cannot directly decide who plays—however, they can determine when and on which court matches take place. An assumption or feeling that there is more demand for men's matches, held by fans and players alike, can lead to officials scheduling them on show courts at times that are more convenient for viewers. In turn, this creates the impression that men's matches are more popular, because more people will see them on television at prime time, creating a feedback loop that places a higher value on the labor and contributions of men. The surplus value of men's tennis, to return to Marx and Ahmed, is created through the circulation that is premised on its higher popularity, making it more valuable by the virtue of assigning it more value and demanding more for the product.

Nielsen data confirms that Americans prefer women's tennis but consume more men's tennis. For example, while respondents to Nielsen's survey claimed greater interest in women's tennis than men's, they were more likely to have recently watched a men's match on television. Since 2011, when Nielsen first began asking people if they had watched a

¹¹⁵ Nielsen

match in the last twelve months, the number of people who have watched a men's match steadily declined. At first, men had a strong advantage but steadily lost viewers while women remained at a level viewership to the point where viewership of the two genders were equal in 2017.¹¹⁶ To argue that men's tennis brings in more viewers on the basis that it is an inherently more entertaining is dubious and, at this point, impossible to prove. In the absence of definitive data, people go with their feelings, and for many, that feeling is that men's tennis is more popular and valuable.

Under circumstances of inequitable advertising and scheduling, differences in attendance and viewer ratings according to gender do not reflect an "inherent interest" in the play of one gender or the other, but the consequences of systematic structures taken for granted in the sport. At the Grand Slam level, advertising practices, like scheduling, impact ratings and perceptions, bolstering the impression that men players are more significant in terms of attracting fans and driving revenue than women players. A look at the social media accounts from various tournaments shows that each of them does more to promote men's players and matches than women's. Not only do the tournaments' official social media accounts post *more* photos of men, they post *different kinds* of photos according to gender. They are more likely to post men in action shots and women players off court; the representation of retired players and wheelchair tennis also significantly favors men.¹¹⁷ The selective over-representation of the men players creates a feedback loop to make men players more recognizable, therefore more marketable, which in turn is used to justify

¹¹⁶ The data above is limited to US fans, but they account for the largest tennis market. The US hosts more high-tier professional tournaments than any other country and the US Open boasts higher revenue than any other Grand Slam. See appendix V.

¹¹⁷ Appendix V

paying higher prize money under the impression they draw in more revenue. It aids in the manufacturing of a preference for men among fans that is particularly significant given the erratic, last minute scheduling of tennis tournaments.

Ten years after Wimbledon announced equal pay, some of tennis's most influential figures revealed affective attachments to men's privileged position in a series of comments made at the California tournament. At a traditional, routine, media breakfast on finals day at Indian Wells, former professional player from South Africa and tournament founder and director Raymond Moore said: "I want to be someone in the WTA, because they ride on the coattails of the men [...] If I was a lady player, I'd go down on my knees and thank God that Roger Federer and Rafa Nadal were born, because they have carried this sport." His incendiary comments reignited the debate about equality in tennis.

Billie Jean King responded in part by saying that prize money should not be attached to gender because of superstar players like Federer and Nadal because of generational shifts when players are injured or retire. The week after Moore's controversial 2016 comments, King and Chris Evert, one of the most popular players of her generation, convened a press conference in Miami. King emphasized the core principle she had touted since forming the WTA, "it's not about the money, it's about the message." She added, "to argue over the prize money issue, what about when Chris [Evert] and Martina [Navratilova] were playing and their ratings were better than the men? We didn't go, 'Oh, we deserve more than the men.' No. Let's just keep it equal and help each other."¹¹⁸ *New York Times* sports writer Harvey Araton pointed out that equal pay became more common in the "pre-Federer era when women were carrying the sport in terms of diverse playing styles, personality, and,

¹¹⁸ Nguyen, "Insider Notebook: Equality for All."

yes, a healthy dose of competitive hostility.”¹¹⁹ Tellingly, the article was titled, “Only a Man Could Forget When Women Ruled Tennis.” Historical trends make it clear that the pendulum could swing back after men’s great like Nadal and Federer retire, allowing women to rule the sport again.

On the same day Moore made his remarks, the top-ranked woman Serena Williams responded to Moore’s affective judgments with a pithy counterargument in a press conference following her match. Williams reminded Moore and the public that the 2015 US Open final had sold out before the men’s. Her value as a tennis player, she asserts, is in her ability to sell tickets, not in her ability to play tennis. The tickets were sold to fans who wanted to see Serena Williams, not to people calculating which match would be likely to produce the more intense tennis or the longest match. In short, her value and work are affective, demonstrating clearly that “it is the very failure of affect to be located in a subject or object that allows it to generate the surfaces of collective bodies.”¹²⁰ Williams does not hold the affect of excitement that fans seek, it is not innately a part of her, but rather it sticks to the surface of her skin and sticks to those bodies that touch her.

Top ranked men’s player Novak Djokovic pivoted the conversation from sexism and lack of respect for women’s tennis as an exciting sport, to a question of equal prize money when he said the men are “more popular” and “should fight for more because the stats are showing that we have much more spectators on the men’s tennis matches,” saying pay should be “fairly distributed” in accordance with attracting spectators.¹²¹ By Djokovic’s

¹¹⁹ Araton, “Only a Man Could Forget When Women Ruled Tennis.”

¹²⁰ Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 128.

¹²¹ Rothenberg, “Anger After Official Says WTA Players Ride on ‘Coattails’ of Men.”

claims, the labor of the professional tennis player is to sell tickets by attracting an audience, which is to say to bring money into the sport. Djokovic, himself is notoriously unpopular among top men, once inspiring the CNN headline “Is Novak Djokovic the most unloved superstar in tennis?”¹²² Given Djokovic’s lack of popularity next to figures like Federer and Nadal, his own logic of remuneration would mean they deserve higher prize money than he does. Similarly, it would be an admission that Serena Williams deserves more than he does, especially at US tournaments where she has become a huge draw. Since players advance through the tournament regardless of their popularity but rather because of how well they play, it is virtually impossible to premise a pay structure on popularity that does not remove the very basic bracket structure of the tournament and prize money allocation from tennis.

Instead of denigrating women directly, Djokovic did so implicitly when he said men are more valuable to the sport and should be allocated more prize money. Essentially, he claimed that he believed in equality but believed women were delivering less revenue, and therefore paying them less would be fair and equitable. In tennis, people in power appear reluctant to say explicitly that women’s tennis is worth less than men’s, rather they make that thought clear implicitly when they say men’s tennis is worth more. This rhetorical approach mirrors ones Sara Ahmed analyzed in white supremacist language. She argues that hatred is “redefined simultaneously as a positive attachment to the imagined subject” rather than as a clearly stated disdain for the other.¹²³ Misogyny in Djokovic’s comments functions in the same mechanism, subverted by the positive attachment to men and their value.

¹²² Ubha, “Is Novak Djokovic the Most Unloved Superstar in Tennis?”

¹²³ Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 118.

I argue that a rarely spoken, but pervasively practiced, misogyny throughout the global tennis community structures the debate for equal pay. By decrying the words of Moore and to a lesser extent Djokovic, the tennis community of fans, journalists, and officials, can claim to support women players, while continuing practices that subordinate them. The disdain for women does not reside in Moore but circulates through him and the practices of tennis. To call opposition to equal pay by gender “misogynistic” then, is not to say that men as people hate women specifically, although this may be true for some men, but that hatred of women circulates in demands for paying men more. Misogyny sticks to the surfaces of those who claim men deserve more, whether or not they simultaneously proclaim they principally believe in equality. The hatred of women circulates through blatantly sexist comments of Moore, and also through the subtle signification of women’s tennis as less valuable when it is preempted by men’s tennis on TV broadcasts.

In an individual sport with a single-elimination tournament structure, entertainment production is a precarious basis for structuring prize money: a flu infection or twisted knee can take the most popular player out of competition for weeks or months or a low ranked player with virtually no fan following can have a break through month and knock out top stars from a tournament. For example, 2015 was also the first year that the US Open women’s final sold out before the men’s final. The match sold out two weeks ahead of time when fans speculated Serena Williams would not only play, but possibly win, her fourth Slam of the year, an achievement that has not been completed since 1988.¹²⁴ This would be a major achievement to witness and was strongly promoted by the tournament and William’s sponsors like Nike and Gatorade. Ostensibly, Williams’ name on the marquee sold tickets to

¹²⁴ Robson, “Serena Williams Chase for Grand Slam Creates Conundrum for Opponents.”

the final. However, she was defeated in the semi-final by world no. 43 Roberta Vinci. Vinci, 32, played Flavia Panetta, 33, in the first ever grand slam final between two Italians and also the women's grand slam final with the highest combined age of two players in the open era.¹²⁵ In the end, Panetta won \$3,300,000 in prize money, while as a semi-finalist, Williams earned \$805,000. There is no doubt that Serena Williams brought in significantly more money in ticket and television ad sales, but it would be an absurd proposition that Panetta did not higher prize money. As the Serena Williams case shows, trends in tennis ranking and the draw of superstar players in the individual sport, greatly impact marketing and ticket sales. While it may be true that men often do bring more revenue to tennis tournaments, the correlation between gender and revenue is too tenuous to fairly base the entire prize money payment structure on.

In the current era of tennis, where top men Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer are major draws at tournaments worldwide, there has been a renewed push by men in the sport to get higher prize money than their woman counterparts. Ion Tiriac, Romanian billionaire and owner of the Madrid Open, which pays equal prize money told reporters in 2016 that he was joining a group of unspecified dissenters in tennis leadership who opposed equal pay. "I like, very much more, women than men [...] the longer the legs theirs are, the more beautiful I think they are [...] But I think we have to go and calculate how much money are the men putting on the table, and how much the women, with TV rights."¹²⁶ Tiriac said that he was "discussing" with the WTA the viability of continuing to offer equal pay, a proposition he considers especially untenable because of the pay increases demanded by the

¹²⁵ Clarey, "Roberta Vinci Ends Serena Williams's Grand Slam Bid at U.S. Open."

¹²⁶ Rothenberg, "Ion Tiriac, Madrid Open's Owner, Has Views on Women's Pay, and Legs."

ATP. WTA executive Steve Simon acknowledged the disparity in revenue generated by the respective television agreements of the ATP and WTA, but said that the disparity represented only one part of the equation for the tournament. “We still have work to do, and we’re going to work at it, but equal prize money goes way beyond just the broadcast revenue situation.” He specifically addressed sanctions, adding, “This sanction has brought great value to the Mutua Madrid Open as well. It’s promoted as men and women, all towards that brand and product, and he sells it as one. And so on that basis, equal is certainly right. I think if he lost the women’s sanction and it wasn’t there, the event wouldn’t have the status it has today.”¹²⁷ Simon suggests there is a value women’s tennis brings to tennis globally that may not be quantifiable but carries prestige and draws people to the sport.

To say that the professional tennis player’s job is to entertain, is to say that their job is to produce affect in fans. With less marketing, air-time, and center court scheduling, a feedback loop is created to fans to suggest women’s tennis is less valuable. When men’s tennis is easier to stumble on when channel flipping and more enthusiastically described in media broadcasts, it follows that people will be more excited. As the images of men’s tennis players circulate, affects attach to them and their labor producing affect in fans becomes more valuable. To say men should be paid more for the labor denigrates the value of women’s labor, which is essentially equal but circulated to a lesser extent, denigrating it to prove its lesser status. Opinion polls and historical trends show a demand and interest in consuming the labor of professional women’s tennis, but the lack of easy access hampers its potential to drive the same revenue as men. Men’s tennis players benefit from the unearned

¹²⁷ Rothenberg.

privilege of tournament directors and media feeling like their work is more valuable and in demand.

Conclusion: Mapping the Way to Go

At a 2019 press conference, I asked WTA President Micky Lawler the central question of this chapter: with regard to equal pay, how does she conceive of the work that prize money rewards? Her lengthy response captures the impossibility of a consensus around defining the labor of professional tennis:

People don't see the work put in. You know whenever there is an argument there are always valid points on both sides of the argument, but to say that the work is not equal? To be a professional tennis player is giving up most of your childhood, giving up a life of normalcy, and friends, and family, you're always on the road, you're circumventing the globe a few times each year, you are constantly working, working, working, and it is a very tough life.

Needless to say there are massive opportunities that come along with this hard work, but it's intense. It's huge. You've got to deal with the jet lag, different foods... So, as a sport that has a public platform, it's really important for us that we go beyond tennis and that we are role models for equal pay for equal work. It's a big value for us."¹²⁸

From Lawler's perspective, the work of the tennis player starts with the sacrifices made in childhood. The normalcy given up for years of training, just for the chance to take advantage of those "massive opportunities," is a base condition to compete at an elite level. The work she refers to is constant, it is not just on the court but it is the travel, training, and lifestyle readjustments players must make to compete. This is the work and sacrifice that Lawler finds tournaments reward with their prize money.

¹²⁸ This response has been edited for clarity and length.

I maintain that the arguments that I have analyzed persist in part because tennis leadership has not come to grips with defining the labor of tennis that prize money is intended to reward. Arguments for equal pay across gender must differ depending on that definition: if professional tennis is considered wage labor, as is implied when people argue men play “more sets”; if it is considered a kind of “manual labor” with rewards for work done on the object of the ball, as might be implied by the argument that men are stronger and are better at tennis; or if the labor is defined as producing entertainment, with rewards for the production of interest and affect in fans. In any case, the payment for the labor is speculative. Prize moneys are set long before play begins in a tournament. Without a clear, shared understanding of exactly what the prize money is intended to reward, the debate over how to allocate pay across gender will persist because the specious arguments to defeat it will continue to take whatever shape is most suitable for any given moment, resting ultimately on affective investments based on sexism.

The primary value women’s labor in tennis produces, which based on my evidence should be compensated equally to men’s, is the affective experience it provides to the fans. This affect is created through ups and downs within matches that keep fans glued to the television, which in turn sells advertising time. This labor is not limited to on court performances. Presence in social and conventional media is part of the labor, increasing fans investments in the players and the sport by building affective attachments and fan communities. The WTA and its players create dedicated followings that they bring with them from one tournament and sponsor to the next, regardless of how long their matches are or how hard they hit the ball. Their ability to produce affect and the effort they put into it are equal to men’s tennis players and should be compensated the same. The evidence I collected shows that failure to bring in more money through women’s tennis is a failure to properly

market and schedule the sport, which is an affective function of the epistemology of ignorance.

Affective investments explain how some players, tournament directors, and fans have come to assume that men's tennis is more popular than women's and that this popularity represents an inherently superior product that needs to be rewarded with higher prize money. I argue that each of the three main claims to argue against equal pay—that men (1) work harder, (2) are inherently better athletes, and (3) draw more fans and money to the sport—is driven by affect. The assumption that men's labor in tennis is more valuable than women's obscures the actual terms and purpose of the labor. The deployment of these three claims in the sport's history show the affective underpinnings on both sides of the debate over what constitutes equitable pay in professional tennis. The claims against equal pay are strategically inconsistent and the shiftiness and illusory nature of the arguments is itself revealing of further affective attachments.

Affective economies structure tennis fans' beliefs about equal pay by gender and their resistance to empirical evidence to show the popularity of women's tennis.¹²⁹ Critical race scholar Paula Ioanide explains, "Once these manufactured fears and desires situated themselves [...] they became uniquely personal and crucial to constituents' sense of identity." She continues, "affective economies structured people's beliefs about crime, terrorism, immigration, and welfare in ways that were distinct from the logics of reason."¹³⁰ I add, they structure peoples' belief about the value of women's labor. People who deploy the three claims I described, from internet trolls to ATP players, deny women equal pay are

¹²⁹ Please see appendix IV for detailed evidence, which is also analyzed in detail in section 3.

¹³⁰ Ioanide, *The Emotional Politics of Racism*, 6.

affectively attached to an imagined masculine supremacy in the sport that keeps them ignorant to the women's contributions. Their fear of losing male dominance in tennis surfaces as an epistemology of ignorance that prohibits them from engaging fully with any of the arguments they set up to pay men more, and, as I have shown, each leads to the logical conclusion that women should in fact earn equal prize money.

Sport is premised on competition, but also fairness. These two ideologies clash when discussing the professionalized segment of the sport. So long as uncertainty persists about what players are competing for, points or ticket sales, the sport's elite cannot settle on what it means to disburse the money fairly. The prize money, supposedly allocated for playing the best tennis, is brought in by selling tennis to fans whose attachment is not meritocratic but affective. The whirl of affect, labor, and commodification circulating through the ATP and WTA tours to create surplus value make it impossible to answer simply: what constitutes the labor of the professional tennis player? While people in the community can even agree on equal pay for equal work, whether or not they can simultaneously believe women should be paid less hinges on what exactly the work is. In the absence of a clear definition of the labor, the only fair and equitable way to proceed is with equal pay.

Chapter 2

Love Means Nothing:

LGB (In)Visibility in a Global Marketplace

In July of 2015, the Ukrainian tennis player Sergiy Stakhovsky upset the polite culture of elite tennis when he told a Ukrainian sports website that half of the women's professional tour is comprised of lesbians. The 29-year-old, who was ranked 49th in the world at the time and was an elected member of the player council,¹³¹ added that consequently he would never let his daughter play. Furthermore, he claimed with certainty that none of the top 100-ranked men were gay. Retired American tennis stars Andy Roddick and James Blake quickly released statements denouncing Stakhovsky. The CEO of the women's tour, Stacey Allaster, commented: "It's a sad reflection of old thinking and I'm proud of all our WTA [Women's Tennis Association] players who are forward thinking, treat everyone equal and reflect life in the 21st century." Chris Kermode, a retired player and head of the men's tour, immediately followed up to say the "remarks are offensive, unacceptable, and have no place in our sport," adding that the comments would be investigated for further action. Despite initial outrage, no formal action was taken against Stakhovsky. After some deliberation, the player council decided not to censure him and

¹³¹ The ATP player council is an elected board of 13 players. The council acts like a player union within the tennis structure to negotiate on behalf of the player collective. The council delivers advisory decisions to the ATP Board of Directors.

without any recommendation to do so from the council, the ATP organization also did not formally rebuke his claims.¹³²

If people were to believe Stakhovsky's claim about the women's tour, it would go against a carefully crafted image of a gay-friendly but straight-dominated space. The comments rattled the tennis world in two significant ways. First, blatant homophobia reads badly in the Western press, undermining the liberal brand the sport had built in the Euro-North American market. Second, if the statements have any truth to them, they are an even greater threat to the sport's livelihood because on a global scale the brand must strike the balance of being LGB-friendly without appearing to be predominately lesbian.¹³³ Only three top-ranked singles players have ever formally come out of the closet during their playing career, and not one in nearly twenty years. Western audiences expect that major brands and organizations express support for gay rights and the WTA has done this by standing behind each of these players and coming out against Stakhovsky.

By making vague proclamations in support of LGB pride while supporting a handful of lower ranked queer players who are out of the closet, the tour indirectly reassures the global public of the heterosexuality of those players who do not come out, publicly announcing their sexual identity or preference. In this chapter, as I explain more thoroughly, I use the term "tour" to refer to the massive complex or assemblage of interrelated actors

¹³² "Sergiy Stakhovsky Condemned by ATP and WTA over Reported Homophobic Comments"; Rothenberg, "ATP Weighs Clearer Discipline for Players' Comments."

¹³³ I have chosen to mostly to refer to LGB pride rather than LGBTQ or other more complex collection of identities because in this chapter I analyze the conventional, Western frameworks of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual identities that are affirmative in stating a preference, unlike queer which is specifically intended to challenge that framework. Queer, as I use it, refers to an abnormal orientation or identity, but does not state a preference or practice. I have chosen to generally exclude trans* identities from my language in this chapter, specifically when referring to players and not fans, because in gender segregated sports, trans* players face unique challenges to and vastly different discrimination that is not analyzed here.

that include players, officials, sponsors, and media. The occasional public relations affirmation of LGB pride and honoring of lesbian icons in the sport creates the impression that the tour is a welcoming and inclusive place; therefore, it might follow, lesbians would feel comfortable coming out of the closet. Since few have publicly declared themselves members of the LGB community, it stands to reason within this logic that there are not many lesbians on tour since they have no reason to hide. This delicate balancing act maintains tennis's reputation as a hetero-feminine sport and secures the possibility of mainstream popularity globally, appealing both to more liberal and conservative markets.

As a global brand, the WTA has developed what I term a post-homo-globalist position. The tour seeks to appease homonationalist markets in the US and Europe, which expect LGB affirmation. Simultaneously, the tour works to maintain an apolitical reputation in spaces where governments have a range of bans on LGB representation and behaviors but are a source for revenue. Queer theorist Jasbir Puar, who coined the term homonationalism, explains that “the gay and lesbian human rights industry continues to proliferate Euro-American constructs of identity (not to mention the motion of a sexual identity itself) that privilege identity politics, ‘coming out’ public visibility, and legislative measures as the dominant barometers of social progress.”¹³⁴ The tour does this, but with marketplace complications. Playing with Puar's term, I keep the familiar language of “homo” to signal conventional, binary framing of sexuality. I add the prefix “post” because that language is significant in tennis's history when prominent players came out in that terminology, but as I will show, explicit naming of sexuality has fallen out of favor, paradoxically even when ostensibly selling pride. Finally, I substitute “globalism” for nationalism to signal that this

¹³⁴ Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism,” 338.

concept is not only global in terms of its geography but is imbricated in neoliberal market forces. In response to conflicting monetary, personal, and social interests, the tour has developed strategies to promote LGB pride in Euro-American markets in a way that resists naming homosexuality. Proclamations that “love is love,” which was a common refrain during the US gay marriage debate, are platitudes to appease US and European homonationalists. The phrase uses a familiar language to signal equality to people already having those conversations about gay rights, without explicitly advocating for gay rights. At face value and in literal translation, the tautology is inoffensive and does not inherently evoke gay rights rhetoric in a way that risks turning away conservative interests or those cultures with different paradigms of sexuality altogether.

I argue that the women’s tennis brand as a whole models a neoliberal, humanist, cultural relativity that attempts to please everyone from players, to fans, to sponsors by refusing any overt stance on LGB visibility or rights. While neoliberalism in the US manufactures sexuality as a public identity with a ritualistic coming out, I argue it does the opposite in global markets by pushing sexuality more deeply into the private sphere as a mechanism to avoid controversy. By my formulation, because the tour is an assemblage of diverse stake holders rallying behind a singular brand, the WTA, there is no possibility of a cohesive or comprehensive perspective to understand how sexuality and sexual orientation function on the tour.

Scandals, such as the one that ensued after Stakhovky’s comments that the women’s tour is mostly lesbians, expose the constituent parts of global sports and force stakeholders to confront where sport fits into culture. The current form of women’s professional tennis can be understood as an assemblage, which Jasbir Puar’s describes as “series of dispersed

but mutually implicated and messy networks.”¹³⁵ In moments of scandal, assemblages are reconstituted, the parts rearranged and reimagined, spatiotemporalities newly put in conversation with each other. In Roland Barthes words, “[the sport] scandal occurs when men collapse the slender barrier separating the two combats: that of sport, that of life.”¹³⁶ The rupture opens up new visibility of the organizing structure of sport and the actors that make up its parts. In this case, it forced a reckoning with where sexual identity fits in on the tour. I anchor my explanation of the convergence of different publics, state and non-state actors, and organizations that go into planning an international tennis event in the framework of assemblage. While the various parts that make up the tour—players, policies, and sponsors—have individual histories, backgrounds, and meanings, they converge to make new meanings as *the tour*. To explain the argument, I must first describe the basic structure of a professional tennis tournament and the ties between the many actors who come together, tracing the transnational flows of money, power, and influence in the process. While some details might appear tedious or superfluous, my point is to demonstrate how intricate and vast the influences on the tour are.

To analyze the complexity of LGB pride in a global marketplace of women’s tennis, I use tools from queer theory and diaspora studies. I consider globally minded critiques of how sexuality is constituted outside the nation state by queer theorists Gayatri Gopinath and Jasbir Puar. I begin by contextualizing my analysis in the history of tennis’s lesbian icons and their legacies; these legacies in the tour’s global reach and diverse stakeholders to consider how LGB pride is commodified, depoliticized, and obscured in the tennis

¹³⁵ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 211.

¹³⁶ Barthes, *What Is Sport?*, 53.

landscape today. I weave together several moments of scandal in which the tour was forced to confront the role of sexual cultures in professional tennis.

Queer In/Visibility in Women's Tennis

Only three elite singles players in women's tennis have ever come out as lesbian or bisexual, but their visibility continues to shape the role of sexuality on the tour today. The backlash they faced and the financial stress on the tour helped the tone for the contemporary climate around sexuality among players, sponsors, and officials. Women's elite tennis is a small world and while the competitive eras are often described by fans and press as generational—such as defined by dominance of players like Suzanne Lenglen, Althea Gibson, or Steffi Graf—the tour as a whole is intergenerational. Past relationships, transgressions, and rivalries re-emerge and new alliances are forged. These histories, personal and professional, form the whole of the tour today. The formal and corporate view of the tour shapes the way these individual actors move and some power they can wield, but many legends who still appear before media at events and provide guidance to young players have been around the tour longer than any sponsor or executive. The spatiotemporal messiness in assemblages, as Jasbir Puar conceives of them, frames the role that iconic retired tennis players, referred to commonly as legends in tennis discourse, occupy today. Time is itself an assemblage and “there are a multitude of times embedded in any enunciation, act, or articulation.”¹³⁷ Former players still appear at tournament sites, often as coaches and commentators, and at ceremonies to receive special honors and awards.

¹³⁷ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*. xxii

Billie Jean King, who remains one of the most visible legends, was outed in 1981. King, the founder and face of the Women's Tennis Association, was outed when an ex-partner filed a palimony lawsuit against her. While she confirmed the affair publicly, King did not initially take on the identity of lesbian. Scholars Susan Birrell and Mary McDonald, revisiting media coverage of the scandal using an intertextual methodology in 2012, analyzed how King controlled the narrative around her affair. In a 1982 autobiography, *Billie Jean*, that was rushed to print soon after, she referred to the relationship as a "very private and inconsequential episode." Throughout the scandal, she received public support from her husband of 19 years, Larry King, who held her hand through press conferences and a Barbara Walters interview.¹³⁸ She told *People Magazine* in 1981, "I hate being called a homosexual because I don't feel that way."¹³⁹ While she accepted that she was forced to publicly acknowledge the behavior and actions, she continued to refuse the identity homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual.

One of the critical moments in King's public image rehabilitation was when Californian media darling Tracey Austin's parents' public insisted that the two continue playing doubles. King had stated she would stop partnering with the conventionally attractive, feminine, white teen phenom 19 years her junior, but Austin's parents' embraced King after coming out. Their public stance that they are comfortable with their daughter working closely with her was part of rebuilding public trust in the tour. If not for the contributions and vocal support from a handful of hetero-feminine players like Austin, the

¹³⁸ Birrell and McDonald, "Break Points," 348. By all appearances, Larry King was aware of the affair and tolerated or supported it. As Chris Evert told a journalist, "When I saw Larry, you know, sitting with Marilyn watching Billie Jean [at the Riggs match], I was just trying to figure out, how did it work? Nobody was making any judgments and everybody was cool with it." Birrell and McDonald, 356..

¹³⁹ Birrell and McDonald, "Break Points," 349.

tour could have been significantly damaged with more sponsors pulling out, negative media coverage, or loss of ticket sales. Birrell notes the public support of another hetero-feminine American, Chris Evert, was particularly noteworthy since “her ‘girl next door’ image had often been constructed by the media in contrast with the more assertively feminist players of King’s generation.”¹⁴⁰

King was the face of the WTA, but the hyper-feminine players supporting her and stepping up publicly to be part of the image of the tour was an attempt to build public confidence that while the tour may have gay players, it was not a gay space. Despite her best attempt to manage the fallout, King lost every personal endorsement within 24 hours of publicly confirming the same-sex relationship.¹⁴¹ Women’s tennis, as a professional sport in the Open Era King ushered in depended entirely on sponsors and fans for its existence. Despite the support she received from players, King’s loss of sponsors was perceived as a warning to closeted players that coming out would cost them dearly.

The warning made a powerful impression on Martina Navratilova, one of the greatest players of her generation. She was born in Czechoslovakia in 1956 defected from the USSR in 1975 to join the WTA. In 1979, she began dating author Rita Mae Brown, a member of the Lavender Menace lesbian feminist group and known for *Rubyfruit Jungle*, the 1973 autobiographical novel about growing up impoverished, abused, and lesbian. Navratilova left her after two years to be with women’s basketball star Nancy Lieberman, prompting Brown to write *Sudden Death*, described by women’s historian Susan Ware as “an unflattering portrait of a lesbian defector tennis star with a more than passing resemblance to

¹⁴⁰ Birrell and McDonald, 354.

¹⁴¹ Jackson, “‘It Was Horrible’: Billie Jean King Recalls Being Outed in 1981”; *Billie Jean King*.

her former lover.”¹⁴² Just a few months after King came out, Navratilova was outed as bisexual in a *New York Daily News* article titled “Martina Fears Avon’s Call If She Talks.”¹⁴³ She had spoken openly with the editor, Steve Goldstein, intending to come out after being granted a US citizenship, but then asked him to hold the story longer after King’s scandal. As he reported it, she worried, “If I come out and start talking, women’s tennis is going to be hurt. I have heard that if I come out—if one more top player talks about this—then Avon will pull out as a sponsor.”¹⁴⁴ Avon, a multi-level marketing company that sells consumer goods to a predominately female customer base did not face the consumer outrage some may have expected, receiving only nineteen letters expressing concern with continued sponsorship. Still, the corporation did not renew its 16-million-dollar contract with the tour.¹⁴⁵

Navratilova was already a villain in American media, portrayed as the aggressive foreigner playing in a masculine style against America’s sweetheart and vocal King supporter Chris Evert. Most women playing at that time had a defensive style, standing behind the baseline and hitting every ball back until somebody made an unforced error like hitting a ball out, Navratilova played an offensive style that was popular on the men’s tour. The Czech rushed the net and took the ball early, forcing her opponents around the court. At the time, popular sports columnist Tom Powers joked about her Schwarzenegger thighs and called her a “walking mixed doubles team.” While rival Chris Evert was always kind to her,

¹⁴² Ware, *Game, Set, Match*, 92.

¹⁴³ Tignor, “Martina’s Moment.”

¹⁴⁴ Tignor.

¹⁴⁵ Tignor; Ware, *Game, Set, Match*, 94.

other players like Czech Hana Mandlikova lashed out at Navratilova by referring to her as a man and an ape at press conferences.¹⁴⁶

In the Cold War moment, Americans were largely tolerant of the defected bisexual in theory as she publicly rejected Soviet rule, but US audiences shamed her masculine form and threw the bulk of fan support behind rival Chris Evert, the conventionally attractive, white hetero-feminine player from Florida.¹⁴⁷ In Birrell's terms, "Media and marketing accounts subsequently constructed Navratilova as an outsider, preferring instead to promote her rival Chris Evert as the ideal (heterosexual) public face of women's tennis."¹⁴⁸

Navratilova was accepted via her role as a foil to the hetero-feminine player, which she helped construct as such by representing an opposite. Her foreign, lesbian, masculine presence on the tour paradoxically bolstered the hetero-femininity of her surroundings in the contested space.

In the messiness of the tour's intergenerational temporalities, the stories and agents of these 1981 outings are still shaping the WTA tour decades later. Navratilova continued to compete successfully for many years, winning her last singles grand slam title in 1990 and her last mixed doubles title in 2006, the year she retired. Today, she travels with the tour working as a commentator. Mandlikova, vocally homophobic at the time, went on to raise two children with another woman in Florida, but never publicly declared a sexual identity. Her daughter is now a promising junior tennis player appearing at major tournaments with

¹⁴⁶ Howard, *The Rivals*, 2005, 126.

¹⁴⁷ Howard, *The Rivals*, 2005.

¹⁴⁸ Birrell and McDonald, "Break Points," 354.

her mother.¹⁴⁹ Evert opened an eponymous tennis academy where she helped developed top American talents, such as Madison Keys and Sloane Stephens, the two singles finalists of the 2017 US Open. She also became a prominent TV commentator, as did Tracy Austin. The US Open is played at the USTA's national tennis center in New York, named for Billie Jean King. She continues to make appearances for speaking engagements at tournaments around the world. This web of names, relationships, and histories are all vital to getting a sense of the assemblage. Forty years later, these women who struggled with managing personal and professional lives through a major scandal in 1981 still routinely run into each other in the VIP and backstage areas of tennis tournaments dispersed around the world and wield enduring influence on the tour and its players, to whom they are mentors, coaches, role models, and a mother.

Although the tour eventually recovered, the financial blows to the WTA that resulted from sponsors pulling out after the two major outings in 1981, no other top singles player came out as lesbian or bisexual until 1999. At the Australian Open, 19-year-old French player Amelie Mauresmo posed a serious threat to the on-court success of popular Orange County native, 22, Lindsay Davenport and the girly, 18-year-old, Swiss media darling Martina Hingis. Speaking in frustration after her semi-final defeat, Davenport told the press, "I thought I was playing a guy." Hingis made a joke about Mauresmo hugging a woman after the win and described her as "half a man." The next day, Amelie Mauresmo told the press corps that she is a lesbian and the woman in her entourage was her girlfriend. While Navratilova and King coming out were scandals, making players fear for the very existence

¹⁴⁹ Shmerler, "Daughter of a U.S. Open Champion Embarks on Her Own Path"; Folley, "Mandlikova to Raise Family with Another Woman."

of the tour, Mauresmo's coming out was quickly embraced by the tour, players, fans, and mainstream media.

Taking on the role of a lesbian, rather than being simply being put in a position to read as a masculine woman, Mauresmo asserted her membership in a legible minority class, as understood through neoliberal frameworks of identity and human rights. She went from reading as simply gender deviant to being a clearly defined type of person that could be articulated and was less threatening as such. Attacks on Mauresmo's masculinity were accepted, or at least not widely decried, until she went through the Euro-American performance of stepping out of the closet. Mauresmo, a white, French tennis player in a long-term relationship with a Swiss travel companion and no stated political objectives could was welcomed as a diverse player, so long as her lesbianism was evacuated of queer of politics. Queer theorist Lisa Duggan argued that by the mid-1990s, "neoliberal politicians and corporate employers and media in the United States had already moved significantly in the direction of 'diversity.'"¹⁵⁰ She argues that a mainstream gay and lesbian tolerance and inclusion privileged a particular visibility of homosexuals that was normative and separated itself from a more radical leftist and collective queer movement.

Hingis eventually issued a non-apology that spliced Mauresmo's identity, who she *is* and what she *does*, demonstrating the extent to which identity politics are privileged. Hingis denied ever calling Mauresmo "half a man," and doubled down by adding that Mauresmo plays like man by hitting with lots of top spin, "it's not that she is a man but she plays really like a man."¹⁵¹ Mauresmo's playing style was, in fact, more typical of the men's game; she

¹⁵⁰Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*, 44.

¹⁵¹ Whyte, "Tennis."

was known for her one-handed backhand and rushing the net to put pressure on her opponents.¹⁵² The defensive response to press and other players describing her as homophobic, was to separate Mauresmo's sexual identity, the privileged category, and focus on her gender expression, which was not formulated in the same neoliberal terms of embracing diversity.

Mauresmo went into the 1999 Australian Open with modest sponsorships, and while she did not lose endorsements straight away, she also did not parlay her sudden success on the court into major endorsement deals or advertising. Many players who have brushes with greatness never break through as superstars. The wide-ranging reasons can include shy personalities of players who simply want to play and prefer to be out of the spotlight, while sponsors specifically pay to have their brands in the spotlight. In other cases, it could be because of bad hiring decisions in the public relations department. Cynically speaking, it can also simply be because some players are deemed unlikeable or unattractive. To speculate in Mauresmo's case, would be a disservice to a great player and potential sponsors who never stepped up. In any case, the reasoning was much less clear and immediate than with King and Navratilova's outings.

The media circus and behind the scenes posturing after Mauresmo came out was indicative of the intergenerational nature of tennis. Billie Jean King called Davenport after the comments were published and convinced her to write an apology letter. The young American apologized promptly at King's urging, issuing a release that also blamed the press for printing only the worst quote that "probably hurt a very nice girl."¹⁵³ Appealing to a

¹⁵² Tignor, "The 50 Greatest Players of the Open Era (W)."

¹⁵³ Clarey, "Homosexuality 'Is Part of My Life,' She Says."

colleague of her playing generation, King told the *New York Times* that she was reaching out to Chris Evert who counseled the Swiss player as part of a mentoring program on tour. King told the paper, “If [Hingis] grew up with [homophobia], that’s unfortunate, but that’s where someone like Chris has to step up. Sometimes, when you’re No. 1, you think you can get away with anything.”¹⁵⁴ In this moment in women’s tennis history, parts of the assemblage became visible, the new roles of old networks laid bare as the whole figured out how sexuality and gender expression might fit into tennis almost twenty years after the last outing.

The players involved in that outing became another part of the tour’s assemblage and continue to shape it another twenty years later. While the public images of these professional athletes are easily abstracted and historicized, each one continues to be a part of the tour, developing its public image and the sport’s culture. White American Lindsay Davenport is a commentator for the BBC and Tennis Channel and has coached some younger players, including multi-racial American Madison Keys, who started out at the Evert Academy and currently acts as one of the tour’s most outspoken LGB allies. Amelie Mauresmo made headlines in 2014 when she became head coach for Andy Murray, the number two men’s player in the world, making her the first woman to coach a top male player.¹⁵⁵ When Davenport gives a commentary on one of Murray’s matches, when one of Navratilova’s trainees comes up against an Evert Academy player, the historical complexity of the encounters is lost on all but the more fanatical tennis viewers. The everyday lives of these individuals who were instrumental in shaping the billion-dollar women’s tennis industry’s

¹⁵⁴ Araton, “King Says Hingis Needs A Talking-To.”

¹⁵⁵ “Murray Much More than Just a Tennis Player, Says Mauresmo.”

norms on sexuality and gender performance are still intertwined and inform the tour's cultures.

Contemporary Women's Professional Tennis as a Post-Homo-Globalist Assemblage

To better appreciate the complex relations involved in contemporary professional women's tennis, consider just one mid-level tournament that is a typical in terms of its many stakeholders. The Mubadala Silicon Valley Classic tennis tournament (MSVC) takes place at San Jose State University, which receives funding from the taxpayers of California. In 2019, the singles draw featured players competing under 20 different flags, many of whom received funding from national federations early in their careers and are still accountable to national sporting ministries for such matters as being eligible for Olympic competition. The MSVC tournament itself is organized by the Florida-based private business IMG. Because the MSVC is an official lead up event to the US Open, IMG cooperates with the US Tennis Association (USTA), a non-profit serving as the main body for US tennis, for such matters as officiating and determining court speed and color.

Unlike the US Open, which the USTA runs as part of the Grand Slam Committee and International Tennis Federation (ITF), the MSVC is a WTA tour level event, which means the WTA sets the rules and makes the sanction agreement with IMG.¹⁵⁶ The title sponsor who supplies funding in exchange for their name on all promotional materials is Mubadala, a state-owned investment company from Abu Dhabi. In 2018, other sponsors advertised in on court banners included US-based United Airlines, Swiss-Japanese watchmaker Citizen, German carmaker Porsche, and "Cheeses of Europe," a European

¹⁵⁶ For more on sanctions, refer to chapter 1

Union funded marketing campaign benefitting the French dairy farmers council.¹⁵⁷ By the time a winner lifted a trophy on center court, millions of dollars had changed hands between the various stakeholders, fans, broadcasters, vendors, and sponsors. In this delicate ecosystem, any overt social-political stance by a player or staff is a liability and can compromise the event's success in terms of positive publicity, selling tickets, and attracting top players if it is deemed disagreeable enough that any interest decides to pull its funding or not renew contracts. For the tournament to run smoothly, the Californian tennis fans must feel welcomed and supported just like the state-owned business from the United Arab Emirates and advertisers for the European Union. This collection of interests forms a single tournament and the assemblage of dozens of professional tournaments worldwide form the tour as a whole.

As a reporter covering the MSVC tournament in 2018, I was able to engage in participation in the media operations of the event and observation of the interests and processes that go into messaging. In the large open press room inside the San Jose State University's athletics center, I was assigned a desk toward the front. The IMG communications director and his team were to my left; they scheduled press conference, allocated credentials, wrote press releases for the tournament, and worked with sponsors. If there was a sponsor event the readers of my publication might be interested in, IMG's job was to wrangle me there and convince me to write a story about it. WTA communications staff had desks straight ahead of me, adjacent to the player press conference set up with studio lights and banners; their job was to coordinate between players and media, their staff emailed match notes and talking points to reporters every morning. If I wanted a one-on-one

¹⁵⁷ "Mubadala Silicon Valley Classic Official Site."

interview with a player, I had to go through them. Because I represented a London-based publication, *BritWatch Sports*, a WTA staffer made sure to I had time with each English player after their matches, fostering national narratives and relationships. The USTA had representatives on site as well, but with less visible presence in the press room.

In my role as a reporter, I observed how messages about LGB pride can be simultaneously erased and targeted in conditions of post-homo-globalism. At one point during the week-long tournament, a fellow journalist asked me if I knew about what pride events were scheduled for that day. A press release from the USTA months earlier had evidently mentioned each US Open Series event would feature a “pride night.” However, nothing was listed on the media schedules distributed by IMG and it was not mentioned in the WTA notes. When I asked the IMG and WTA communications staff, nobody had heard there would be such a thing or that it was promised by the USTA. No USTA staff was readily available as they did not have an assigned section in the press room. After asking around a bit, it appeared the events had never been planned and I excused it as a casualty of a last minute venue change that left tournament organization scrambling the last few months.¹⁵⁸ Later that afternoon, however, I took a walk behind the stadium and saw that tents had been set up and retired doubles player and ESPN commentator Australian Rennae Stubbs and the on-court emcee American Andrew Krasny, both openly gay and white, were hosting a special Pride Night event with maybe one hundred folks in attendance.

In the stands during night matches afterward, I approached some fans wearing tee shirts for an LGBT tennis club and learned that they heard about the event through their

¹⁵⁸ The tournament had previously been played at Stanford University, but had to be moved when the university banned all events with corporate sponsorship from the campus Bowles, “Tennis Tournament Debuts at San Jose State University.”

local organization. I later found out that the USTA “Diversity & Inclusion” initiative collaborated with the San Francisco based Gay and Lesbian Tennis Federation (GLTF) to sell tickets for the USTA Pride Banquet I had stumbled upon behind the stadium for \$74, offering a shuttle service from a gay bar in San Francisco for an additional \$16 fee. Ostensibly similar events, like a Women’s Day brunch, were pushed to media and promoted on public schedules, while the USTA’s Pride Night was kept at a distance from the tennis media, WTA, and perhaps even IMG and sponsors.

In the GLTF communications about the event the tournament, the MSVC is named separately and in addition to the pride night. The group refers to the “Mubadala Silicon Valley Classic + LGBTQ Pride Reception” and “Quarterfinal Night at the Mubadala Silicon Valley Classic and the USTA Pride Banquet that precedes it.”¹⁵⁹ The pride night is not a part of the tournament event, but rather it is a supplement from the USTA. The USTA press release that initially announced the festivities a month prior listed it among other special events that included “military appreciation” and “Hispanic days.”¹⁶⁰ The press release explains: “Diversity and inclusion is a priority for the sport, and engaging growing Hispanic and LGBT communities continues to help tennis reflect today’s America.” In terms of how search engines work, this buries the content in results about the event, unless the searcher specifically seeks out the information. The USTA, a national non-profit, played into homonationalist logics of catchphrases like diversity, inclusion, and pride, while the corporate and multinational entities on site, like IMG, Mubadala, and the WTA were distanced from the campaign.

¹⁵⁹ “GLTF - Mubadala Silicon Valley Classic + LGBTQ Pride Reception.”

¹⁶⁰ Tennis Panorama News, “2018 US Open Series Launches 15th Season Next Week.”

If the LGBTQ pride night had been publicized, it would have appeared prominently next to the Mubadala name in all communications, since the investment firm had explicitly paid to be the name sponsor. As such, media convention is to name them in all press about the tournament, such as with a headline that “Mubadala Silicon Valley Classic Welcomes 200 LGBT Tennis Fans for Pride Night” rather than a simpler headline referring simply to the “Silicon Valley Classic” or a “San Jose Tennis Tournament.” Name association is specifically what Mubadala paid for. I propose this is a possible reason that any mentions of the pride night were targeted directly to gay tennis fans and kept from the main press releases. Although rarely enforced, Abu Dhabi has strict laws banning homosexual acts. In the emirate, many LGBT+ websites are blocked by the government, along with the popular gay hookup app Grindr.¹⁶¹

If a state-owned firm was seen as promoting positive visibility for same-sex sexuality abroad, in any capacity, the response at home could be awkward at best. As it was orchestrated, however, people in Abu-Dhabi reading every press release and international news article about the tournament would not have seen any mention of the event. Sponsor guests visiting the Mubadala VIP lounge overlooking the court could have been entirely unaware of the pride night festivities on the other side of the stadium. This is not to suggest people associated with the firm asked to be excluded from any LGB messaging, but just as likely, Western, orientalist imagery of a homophobic Middle East might have led staff from IMG or the USTA to keep matters separate from the offset as not to risk upsetting a sponsor. Depending on the operational involvement of the sponsor, which varies greatly from one tournament to another, Mubadala representatives may well never have known their event

¹⁶¹ “LGBT Travellers in United Arab Emirates.”

included a pride night.¹⁶² Or, perhaps the firm knew exactly what was going on and wanted to signal to the LGBT community that they are welcome customers, despite what they may have heard about homophobia in the Emirates, but preferred consumers and stakeholders outside that niche did not make the association. The motivations, regardless of what they were, have little bearing on my analysis.

The events of that day exemplify post-homo-globalism because of how components of the assemblage of women's professional tennis came together to host an LGBT pride night that made the niche community feel empowered as a member of the global tennis community, while the global tennis community went on never knowing they were there. Mubadala was not linked to promoting LGBT pride in any public forum, while people affiliated with LGBT tennis clubs were recognized for their identity. Buying tickets and sponsoring the event, gay fans and Mubadala, respectively, each paid money to IMG. The fans were able to feel good about supporting an event that embraced their sexual identity, and the sponsor was able to get publicity in a liberal market without putting them in a position to defend abroad what their government-owner criminalizes at home.

To analyze the tensions of sexual cultures in a moving global context, I turn to queer diaspora studies, specifically Gayatri Gopinath's contributions to the field post-colonial studies. The tour does not constitute a diaspora in the sense of people from one nation dispersing to other sites; rather it is the precise opposite: individuals from dispersed home towns come together to travel the globe as a unit. Professional women's tennis and diaspora share blended cultural understandings in a globalized setting. Surrounded by international

¹⁶² For example, at the Porsche Tennis Grand Prix in Stuttgart the car maker has established a whole operation for tennis sponsorship and event management, Porsche Tennis, with player and press food provided by Porsche Catering, all at the Porsche Arena.

athletes and support staff while traveling the world from a young age, professional tennis players are not positioned to develop mono-cultural understandings of the world. Behind the scenes, the players are largely isolated from local communities, because they travel roughly ten months out of the year. The top stars, typically started to play international tournaments in their childhoods or early teens, forgoing conventional education and instead being home schooled or taught at a handful of elite residential tennis academies. The IMG Academy in Florida, for instance, draws top youth talents from all over the world to live and train on-site where players spend their childhoods surrounded by a virtual United Nations of athletes. *Wall Street Journal* tennis writer Michael Mewshaw explained, women’s professional tennis players are “tribal creatures who, regardless of national origin, share the same mores, totems, and taboos.” He continues that “forced by circumstance to travel and live together, the tennis tribe places a premium on patience, discretion, and tolerance—tolerance of bizarre behavior, irrational outbursts, and varying sexual appetites.”¹⁶³ Players carry vestiges of their home cultures, but have developed their own, hybridized culture based on tolerating eccentricities of individuals and unfamiliar cultures. Diaspora studies offers insights into this space of national illegibility.

This creates the space to analyze the tensions of the tour assemblage where individuals are constantly reformulating their national allegiances and personal narratives. For example, Naomi Osaka was born in Japan to a Japanese mother and Haitian father, but grew up in the US with Japanese and US American citizenships. When she had to choose a single citizenship under Japanese law, she made the strategic choice to give up the American citizenship even though she resides in Los Angeles. The sponsorship opportunities as the top

¹⁶³ Mewshaw, *Ladies of the Court*, 1.

Japanese player stand out compared to being an up-and-comer in Serena Williams' shadow in the US.¹⁶⁴ Despite acting in the role of national representative, a globalized corporate sports world is in many ways their primary home. Professional tennis has its own grammar, leadership structure, by laws, codes of conduct, educational system, literature, and other institutions more commonly associated with nations. In fact, the global tennis community, comprised of players, fans, media, and officials, acts as a nation in Benedict Anderson's definition of imagined community with shared publications and knowledges that create a feeling of home among its members when they convene in real or virtual spaces.¹⁶⁵

The experience of movement and hybridity imbuing scholarship by the likes of Gayatri Gopinath positions it uniquely to frame the sexual cultures of women's tennis. Adding queer analysis to the equation, Gopinath explains, "The critical framework of a specifically *queer* diaspora, then, may begin to unsettle the ways in which the diaspora shores up the gender and sexual ideologies of dominant nationalism on the one hand and sexual ideologies on the other."¹⁶⁶ A key point in queer diaspora studies is how American and Northern European cultures mark queerness through LGB pride and visibility, in ways that limits Westerners' ability to understand or even see queer experiences outside of that lens, as Gopinath shows with the reception of South Asian diasporic films in different contexts. In her analysis of films by diasporic South Asian film makers that portray queer

¹⁶⁴ Rich, "Will Naomi Osaka Pick Japanese Citizenship or American?"

¹⁶⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

¹⁶⁶ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 10.

subjects in India, Gopinath explains they challenge a “Euro-American ‘lesbian’ epistemology that relies on notions of visibility and legibility.”¹⁶⁷

The coded language of post-homo LGB pride in the global marketplace was apparent in an August 2019 video made by Tennis Canada at the Rogers Cup in Toronto. The event is a US Open Series tournament, like the Mubadala Silicon Valley Classic. In collaboration a non-profit organization called You Can Play, the tournament’s clothing sponsor, Italian-Korean brand Fila, distributed rainbow flag gear at the event. Czech tennis star Karolina Pliskova, one of Fila’s top players, tells the camera, “I’m very proud to wear my rainbow wristband because tennis is for everyone.”¹⁶⁸ For a typical, Western, LGBTQ audience, this is an expression of support for the community. For Pliskova’s non-American or non-Western-European fans, this might not read as much more than an apolitical statement supporting her sponsor or a vague, meaningless statement about inclusion with regard to disability, gender, race, or religion.¹⁶⁹ Europeans, particularly older ones and those who do not interact directly with pride movements or media coverage of them, would be unlikely to immediately recognize and identify a rainbow sweatband as an expression for gay inclusion.

The Tennis Canada video is one example of many where the tour and its players skirt the line of embracing the LGBTQ demographic without compromising their appeal in the

¹⁶⁷ Gopinath, 26.

¹⁶⁸ Livaudais, “‘Tennis Is for Everyone’ Initiative Brings Pride to Rogers Cup.”

¹⁶⁹ Although the rainbow flag has been used to signify LGBT pride in the US since 1978, when Harvey Milk encouraged drag performer Gilbert Baker to come up with a symbol for the gay community; it did not gain national recognition outside the queer community until 1994.¹⁶⁹ In Europe, rainbow flags have a much longer history. The first recorded use was in the 15th Century by German theologian Thomas Müntzer to draw attention to his reformist works; the flag reemerged as a symbol for change during Germany’s 16th Century peasant wars. Thomas Paine advocated it be flown by neutral ships during time of war, an expressly apolitical symbol. In 1961, it became associated in Europe with the anti-war and anti-nuclear power movements. More recently, they were flown from balconies across the continent during the second Iraq-War. Grovier, “The History of the Rainbow Flag.”

global marketplace. The video description on YouTube leaves it unsearchable for explicitly queer terms: “Paving the path for inclusivity in tennis. Thanks to partners Fila and North American non-profit You Can Play, Rogers Cup was able to bring Pride to life at a tennis tournament in a whole new way.” The description on the WTA’s Facebook page sharing the video was more explicit, announcing “the Rogers Cup hosted the revamped LGBTQ Pride celebration.”¹⁷⁰ In the video, David Palumbo, Vice Chair of You Can Play announces their mission as creating “a culture of inclusion and belonging for everyone in sports, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression.” He describes wearing the rainbow wrist bands as a statement of “inclusion for everybody, regardless of who they are, who they love.” The only other mention of what sexualities the 1:44 minute video refers to is from a woman interviewed on the grounds, who introduces herself as a physical education teacher and says “I like the link between sports and the LGBTQ world.” Refusing to say who should be proud and who can be included the video uses a more agreeable, apolitical language. In shots from around the tournament grounds, logos for name sponsor Rogers, a Canadian telecom, and Fila can be seen clearly. On court shots display Rolex and BMW logos from the backwall. Logos for Dubai’s state-owned airline Emirate, another big sponsor of the event whose name appears around the site are obscured in each shot.

The narrow Western framing of sexual practices as identities creates the central conditions I analyze, allowing the tour to be read as both queer and hetero-feminine simultaneously in such a way to appease global audiences and stakeholders who can see

¹⁷⁰ The Facebook post received mixed comments from “fans” of the WTA page. At time of writing, the video had 108 thumbs-ups, 32 hearts, and 7 angry emojis. There were 16 comments by 11 users. Eight commenters were critical and/or homophobic, 3 were affirmative. The affirmative ones included the tournament page, a user purporting to be a woman in the UK and a man who does not share his location. Of the homophobic commenters, 7/8 purported to be men, including 2 Americans, 1 Canadian, 1 Malaysian, 1 Polish, and one who did not share location. An informant at the WTA told me they do not delete any comments on their posts, but threats and harassment reported by other users are deleted by Facebook administrators.

what they want to see—a global analog for “don’t ask, don’t tell.” In the Euro-American epistemology, there is visible representation of LGBTQ pride directed at queer audiences, but it is framed in coded terms that do not read outside of that particular cultural grammar. The distinction between the visible and the legible appears in the form of players practicing in a Nike shirt that says “Equality” in rainbow letters or veiled statements like “tennis is for everyone” and the tautological “love is love.” The ambiguity of the wording and imagery is innately inoffensive and virtually apolitical when viewed outside of a Western logic of pride and sexuality.

Similarly, the responses denouncing Sergiy Stakhovsky’s homophobic comments, such as Chris Kermode’s statement that the remarks “have no place in our sport” represent rebukes against discrimination and hate but stop short of demanding LGB inclusion in elite tennis in any significant way. The comments do not affirm lesbian and bisexual WTA players so much as they are condemning the man who brought the WTA players’ sexuality to public attention in the first place. Stakhovsky called attention to the possibility of rampant lesbianism on the tour, broke from the post-homo-globalist norms of professional tennis and in that moment of scandal, and tore down the barrier between the combats of sport and life. Rather than denouncing the claims on their merits or engaging with the allegations, his peers dismissed the claims altogether and condemned hate without expressing meaningful support for lesbians on the tour. Considering the last high ranked, out-lesbian women’s player had retired six years earlier, the global tour was by the public measures, indeed post homo.

Post-Homo-Globalism as an Apolitical Practice

Since the major outings by Billie Jean King, Martina Navratilova, and Amelie Mauresmo, shook up the sport, it is no surprise that subsequent players have

shirked coming out in a conventional sense. That is not to say, however, that they have more effectively or carefully hid in the closet. Since joining Instagram in 2014, Spanish player Carla Suárez Navarro has used social media to come out in a way that refuses any articulation of her sexual identity. Suárez Navarro, who held a career high singles ranking of sixth in the world in 2016, casually began sharing pictures of herself and apparent partner, Spanish professional soccer player Olga Garcia, on photo-based social media platform Instagram. Flying under the radar of the tabloid press, refusing a sound bite or moment of coming out, her personal life in the glass closet has largely evaded any significant attention outside of online tennis fan forums as she slowly became visible without naming or proclamations of LGB pride. There was no moment for the press to report that she came out and no moment for homophobic players or fans to lash out because rather than coming out at once, she slowly confirmed it through posting an increasing amount of pictures with the same woman on her social media and gradually adding more loving captions that there was never one moment where she announced this is her girlfriend but rather laid out the bread crumbs for her followers to reach that conclusion at their own pace and slowly becoming out while never coming out.

To discuss Suárez Navarro's sexual orientation, especially in the absence of clear self-identification, is to teeter on the border of academic analysis and gossip. Queer art historian Gavin Butt, analyzing queer disclosures in the mid-20th Century New York art world, claimed, "indeed to speak or write of homosexuality *at all* is to run the risk of being taken as a gossip."¹⁷¹ Gossip, however, as he goes on to argue is a queer epistemology.

¹⁷¹ Butt, *Between You and Me*, 4.

Previously, art historians sought to find evidence of queerness in art, taking on a job of unearthing and finding a truth about the artist. His work was more interested in the function of gossip, how it shaped knowledge and experience, asking, “how might the circulation of gossipy fictions perpetuate a *queer* knowledge of (homo)sexuality, one that, as Heidegger would say, ‘perverts’ the very act of disclosing itself.”¹⁷² I have no intention of finding a truth about Suárez Navarro’s sexuality through a close reading of her social media; my intention is to revel in the tension of a very real possibility that she is out without ever having coming out.

In her first years on Instagram, Suárez Navarro posted dozens of pictures in which she was embracing other women, both tennis players and women she describes as friends. This is nothing noteworthy or unusual, so while lesbian fans speculated in chat rooms this also is not noteworthy because they do this with all prominent women players; her short hair and one-handed backhand were deemed as just as credible evidence by tennis fans on lesbian forums like Zeta boards L Chat. In June 2017, she posted a picture with her arm slung around Olga Garcia and a caption wishing her a happy birthday, to which the soccer player responded thanking her and calling her “my favorite tennis player,” by no means a coming out or unambiguous declaration of queer identity. Earlier that year, Ekaterina Bychovka, a Russian player who had reached a career high rank of 66 more than a decade prior, told Eurosport there were several lesbians on tour and named Suárez Navarro. The comments were summarily ignored by mainstream tennis press and barely made a blip in online fan forums.

¹⁷² Butt, 6.

The abundance of pictures posted with different, conventionally attractive feminine women, dilutes any impact of a single picture. As Suárez Navarro continued to post pictures with various women, including doubles partner Garbiñe Muguruza, it continued to appear just as easily as an affectionate female friendship as a lesbian relationship. Out of respect to players and the risk of losing credentials by upsetting WTA communications staff that is present at all interviews and press conferences, it is virtually unheard of for media to ask players invasive personal questions beyond the most mundane. Without pressure from the press to come out, Suárez Navarro could continue to quietly be out on social media without having to announce her identity. When she posted a picture with her arm wrapped tightly around her physical therapist at a restaurant in November 2019 with the caption “live life with who gives you life” and the hashtags #amistad, meaning “friendship,” and #bettertogether fans and fellow players commented with heart emojis.¹⁷³ On the main tennis subreddit forum, a user posted the picture asking “Significant other?.” One user commented that it was hashtagged “friendship” to suggest that they were not a couple, while another user simply noted “looks like it.” Another commenter touched on my thesis here, saying “I always knew she was a lesbian but I guess it went under the radar.”¹⁷⁴ Specifically, I argue she could evade attention by being slow, casual, and never labelling herself. By Valentine’s Day 2020, just three months after the dinner with the physio, she posted pictures with soccer player Olga Garcia again, captioning the photo of them cuddling with Garcia’s kitten with heart emojis, a note of the date, and #SanValentin. Three weeks before that, she had posted a gallery of pictures with another physio, captioned with a smiling heart face emoji including

¹⁷³ Caption translated from Spanish to English by Instagram translate function. Suárez Navarro, “Live Life with Who Gives You Life.”

¹⁷⁴ jade09060102, “Carla Suarez Navarro’s Significant Other?”

picture of them sitting on a motorcycle together, acting playfully on a practice court, and sitting close together in a car. In dominant frameworks of binary orientation, bi-erasure, and monogamy, her Instagram is illegible, saying nothing while sharing everything.

By tacitly self-publishing evidence of what could be described as a queer sexuality, Suárez Navarro exists in a space of being simultaneously in (1) the closet, (2) out of the closet, and (3) allows for the possibility that she is straight and there was never a closet to begin with. Under conventional Western paradigms of sexuality, she is Schrödinger's tennis player: until she names her sexuality, she can be thought of as both queer and straight. Suárez Navarro's refusal to give her sexual orientation a name, or to claim an identity in a framework King, Navratilova, and Mauresmo are articulated in, is a refusal to give Western discourse the confession that sexuality demands. In terms of my post-homo-globalist framework, this exemplifies the "post-homo" portion. In her social media, she does not identify in the familiar terms "homosexual" or "lesbian," while creating the impression that she engages in the relationships and practices associated with those labels. In the Euro-American lesbian epistemology of visibility and legibility described by Gayatri Gopinath in queer diasporic filmmaking, Suárez Navarro makes her love and relationship visible without announcing it in familiar terms that would lend legibility.

In *Impossible Desires*, Gopinath explains her project as an analysis of texts that "run counter to standard 'lesbian' and 'gay' narratives of the closet and coming out that are organized exclusively around a logic of recognition and visibility."¹⁷⁵ Gopinath's focus is on national and diasporic discourses "producing this particular subject position [of the queer

¹⁷⁵ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 16.

female] as impossible and unimaginable.”¹⁷⁶ I argue that Suárez Navarro’s slow coming out, which was more of a *becoming* out, exposes similar logics from the inside Euro-American nationalist and globalist culture. Her context, the tennis tour filled with homoerotic moments and a legacy of lesbian icons, produces the impossibility and unimaginability that she might not be a lesbian or inhabit a space outside the conventions of Western LGB pride and visibility.

Suárez Navarro’s state of quasi-closetedness is in some ways a position of power, to command attention if she should put her identity into familiar terms, while the slow becoming out evacuated the power of Bychovka outing her to Eurosport. Michel Foucault argues that in the Victorian era, the regulation of sex discourses bound power to language because of “a determination on the part of agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause *it* to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail.”¹⁷⁷

Institutions of power, such as the church and medicine, used the supposed repression of sexuality to turn sex into language that can be accumulated. For example, Foucault cites church confessional manuals to show how they instructed priests to solicit every intimate detail in confessions of a sexual nature in order to possess more knowledge about, and therefore power over, the population. While sex was broadly censored, “its aspects, its correlations, and its effects must be pursued down to their slenderest ramifications.”¹⁷⁸ By refusing to confess, share details, or give language to her identity, Suárez Navarro refuses to submit.

¹⁷⁶ Gopinath, 16.

¹⁷⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 18.

¹⁷⁸ Foucault, 19.

In an already precarious labor market, being politicized in any way presents a major liability for players looking to build their brands in a global marketplace. Controversy that might upset a player's global fan base, such as explicitly supporting gay marriage, or taking a stance against a government policy in any of the markets players or sponsors are involved in, could cost players a significant portion of their income. Unlike a domestic league athlete, like out lesbian WNBA player Sue Bird, or an athlete representing a national team, like her partner Megan Rapinoe, tennis players must appeal to a significantly wider audience and play the majority of their matches outside of their home country.¹⁷⁹ Top athletes make only a portion of their income from prize money. Although the dollar amounts are kept private, it is estimated that many elite tennis players make about half their income from sponsorship deals and appearance fees.¹⁸⁰ An appearance fee is a guaranteed amount of money paid to a player for competing in a tournament, regardless of how well they perform. For example, if a tournament like the Mubadala Silicon Valley Classic wants to ensure high ticket sales, they might offer a player such as the Williams sisters a six-figure amount to enter the tournament. Like sponsorship deals, the appearance fees are commensurate with a player's brand power and popularity in any given market. Japanese player Naomi Osaka's name on the scoreboard can sell more tickets in Japan than in Germany, and she can negotiate fees accordingly.

The WTA can and does promise that tournaments will not deny a player access on grounds of sexuality, but if coming out makes a player less popular in any of the markets where the tour stops, she stands to lose a significant source of income from appearance

¹⁷⁹ Jean-Philippe, "Megan Rapinoe and Sue Bird's Love Story Shows They're the Ultimate Power Couple"; Bird, "So the President F*cking Hates My Girlfriend."

¹⁸⁰ Badenhausen, "The Highest-Paid Female Athletes 2019: Serena And Osaka Dominate."

fees.¹⁸¹ If a player is openly gay, she might be viewed as a lesser draw at best or a liability at worst. For example, if a player were to come out and proudly post LGB pride content on their social media, loving pictures with partners and pictures from gay pride parades, it could create an awkward situation at a tournament such as the Kremlin Cup, in Russia, where the ban on distribution of gay “propaganda.” Whereas the ITF and WTA guarantee that players and their teams can travel to the country and be safe from political persecution on the grounds of their sexual orientation, it would be inconceivable that the tournament would pay six figures for that player to compete in the tournament when their public persona is essentially banned from being shown to minors under Kremlin laws.¹⁸² It is in the player’s interest to become not only the best tennis player, but also to achieve status as a celebrity who has transnational appeal. In moments of scandal in the sport, players find themselves in difficulty to balance their responsibilities to their own ethical commitments and stakeholders that have other interests.

¹⁸¹ The ITF Constitution states that every member organization: “must preserve the integrity and independence of Tennis as a sport, and must carry out its objects and purposes without unfair discrimination on grounds of colour, race, nationality, ethnic or national origin, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability or religion. All ITF events are open to tennis players based on merit and without discrimination. In addition, the ITF Player Welfare Policy states that ‘Covered Persons’ (defined as player support team members, players and credentialed persons) shall not discriminate in the provision of services on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, national origin, religion, age or sexual orientation.” This policy means that accommodations must be made, including allowing observant Jews scheduling privilege so they do not play on the Sabbath and allowing men and women equal access to full training facilities. While these rules are officially a part of every member’s national organization, the power to write and enforce these laws lies with the Western managed organizations, which are in turn hamstrung by various financial interests all over the world. The limits of international sports bodies in negotiating sporting events with nations whose laws run counter to the organizations’ charter was exemplified at the Sochi Olympics. For more see Postlethwaite, “Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics and the Controversy of the Russian Propaganda Laws.”

¹⁸² For more about propaganda laws in Russia see DeKerf, “Anti-Gay Propaganda Laws.” Briefly, she explains, “In 2013, President Putin signed a new federal law prohibiting propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships. Since then, it is against the law to spread positive information about gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people (LGBT) among minors. Allegedly, children should not be misguided into believing that non-traditional relationships are equivalent to traditional (heterosexual) relationships.”

The risks of not only being a lesbian, but also of being seen as supporting LGBT pride were exemplified in a series of comments by Russian player Svetlana Kuznetsova. After Australian tennis legend Margaret Court, now a Pentecostal minister, made a series of overtly homophobic and transphobic comments in 2017, there was a push among tennis fans to rename an arena at the Australian Open that carried her name. Later in this chapter I analyze that controversy more fully; here, I am interested in comments made by Kuznetsova in response to the uproar. Following a match at the 2017 French Open, she spoke briefly with a handful of journalists outside the main press conference room at. *New York Times* reporter Ben Rothenberg, who kindly shared the full recording with me, asked Russian Svetlana Kuznetsova if she had comments about renaming the Margaret Court Arena in light of the recent comments. Clearly aware of the situation, then 32-year-old Kuznetsova responded: “The world is becoming more free everywhere and I don’t see nothing wrong with people who love each other. To tell that it’s wrong or whatever? Everybody’s life, and everybody’s choice. You’re not God to judge nobody [...] You cannot tell people what to do or who to love or how they should live, you see? If people agree, and their love brings happiness, it doesn’t destroy.”¹⁸³ The comments quickly circulated when Rothenberg tweeted them and tennis fans interpreted them to be affirmation of a gay positive sentiment, even though she never specifically or explicitly referred to gay rights in her statements. As vague as the comments were, they were celebrated by gay tennis fans. On Twitter, however, a user commented, “You can not imagine what type of comments she’s enjoying back home in Russia

¹⁸³ Kuznetsova, *Kuznetsova Roland Garros 3*.

right NOW because of these words [...] Most of them are fine with those words. But remember in Russia tennis is mostly a sport of the lefties. Whatever ‘left’ means in Russia.”¹⁸⁴ In fact, the comments flirted with illegality under legislation that was relatively new at the time.

In 2013, the Kremlin passed an anti-LGBTQ bill commonly referred to as the propaganda law. The legislation bans the distribution of media to minors that equates the social value of hetero- and homosexual relationships or makes the latter appear positive and attractive. Defending the law to international critics, Russian officials stated it was not discriminatory and intended only to protect children. While Kuznetsova did not violate this law, sharing her comments with a 17-year-old in her hometown Moscow would have been criminal. Any Russian publication that would have discussed her comments would have had to carry a special designation that it is intended for consumption by adults only. Standing by those comments, vague as they were, could have been a significant public relations liability for the Russian player.

Kuznetsova walked back her statements the following day. On Twitter, she wrote, “It’s time to get used to it already, that you give an interview on one occasion, and people manage to make a completely different conclusion .. I never cease to be surprised”¹⁸⁵ Just as vague as her criticism of Margaret Court, Kuznetsova’s about face did not specifically reference Court, how the comments were interpreted, or clarify what she meant. Having been a professional player for 17 years already with a

¹⁸⁴ Kravetz, “Kravetz on Twitter.”

¹⁸⁵ Kuznetsova, “It’s Time.”

career high ranking of number two a decade earlier, it strains the imagination to think she did not know exactly how her comments would be interpreted.

Kuznetsova's predicament—being asked to comment on homophobia in Australia, by an American reporter, while playing in tennis in France under a Russian flag and representing a Chinese sponsor—is a minefield of possible missteps. Although the ITF bylaws that govern Grand Slam events like the French Open protect Kuznetsova's right to make vague claims affirming that there is nothing wrong with two people loving each other, the ITF cannot protect her from government, sponsor, media, or fan backlash. Theoretically, the ITF's agreement with the Russian Tennis Federation should protect her from professional backlash, such as cutting her from the national team on political grounds, but in most circumstances such retaliation would be impossible to prove. Regardless of why she softened her initial comments, it is clear that in the global context of tennis, players walk fine lines appeasing global and national stakeholders, with financial incentives to appease homonationalist Euro-Americans while also supporting nationalist agendas in the home country to remain in good standing there. Just as Kuznetsova at no point made definitive statements about LGB relationships, another player was evidently creeping out of the closet on social media without definitively announcing her sexuality. I say evidently, because like with Kuznetsova, there are evidence and context clues that ascribe meaning to behaviors and claims, but these players refuse the language that might be seen as constituting proof in the public eye.

Merging Generations of Ideology and Political Practice

The generational and social shifts in how sexuality is dealt with in women's professional tennis were revealed in the scandal surrounding comments by Margaret Court, which prompted Kuznetsova's initial remarks. Court is one of tennis's most decorated players, holding the record for the most Grand Slam singles titles, with a total of 24.¹⁸⁶ After retiring on the cusp of the Open Era in 1977, she moved to Perth, Australia where she became a Pentecostal minister. In May 2017, the 74-year-old married mother of three announced in a letter to the editor that she would boycott Australia's flagship Qantas airlines over the CEO's support of gay marriage in Australia. In the days that followed publication, professional tennis players, both active and retired, began to call for the arena to be renamed. For instance, out lesbian French player Richel Hogenkamp, who was close to her career high ranking of number 94 at the time, told a press conference at the French Open that some players might be uncomfortable playing in a stadium associated with Court. The center-right Prime Minister of Australia, Malcolm Turnbull, distanced the player from the person, telling an Australian Radio Station, "Whatever people may think about Margaret Court's views about gay marriage — and she's entitled to have them and she's entitled to fly on whatever airline she likes or not — you know, she is one of the all-time greats. The Margaret Court Arena celebrates Margaret Court the tennis player."¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ For context of the achievement, Serena Williams is at second place with 23 Grand Slam titles, having just passed Steffi Graf third with 22. Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova are tied for fifth place with 18 titles each. Billie Jean King is seventh with 12 titles. Martina Hingis won 5 Grand Slam titles, Lindsay Davenport 3, and Amelie Mauresmo 2. Svetlana Kuznetsova won 2. The value and meaning of Court's record are sometimes challenged, as the titles were earned before the Open Era, when the field was limited. Additionally, eleven of her titles were won in Australia at a time that many other players simply chose not to travel to Melbourne, and it was not uncommon for the draw at the tournament to be almost exclusively players from Australia and New Zealand. Even taking this into account, however, her on court accomplishments are formidable.

¹⁸⁷ Rothenberg, "Players Want Margaret Court Arena Renamed Over Remarks on Gays."

When Tennis Australia, the not-for-profit organization that serves as the sport's federation, named a major arena for Margaret Court in 2003, the tennis community largely dismissed her past racist and homophobic comments as a function of the time in which she uttered them. The dedication ceremony celebrating her contributions to the sport drew little protest. While Court occasionally garnered negative attention for expressing homophobic views over the years after her retirement, the tennis community continued to ignore her beliefs and preferred to speak of her only in terms of tennis excellence. Her comments did not rise to the occasion of a scandal and were relegated to the realm of her private, post-playing life.

The first protests against the namesake arena occurred in 2012 after Margaret Court told the *West Australian* newspaper, "No amount of legislation or political point-scoring can ever take out of the human heart the knowledge that in the beginning God created them male and female and provided each with a unique sexual function to bring forth new life."¹⁸⁸ In response, gay rights advocates suggested people bring rainbow flags to the venue. One protestor was a popular up-and-comer, the 17-year-old British player Laura Robson. The conventionally attractive, white, hetero-feminine player was predicted to be the next big thing in women's tennis after she had great success on the junior Grand Slam circuit. Scheduled to play on Margaret Court Arena, she wore a rainbow hairband for her match. She explained to media later, "My intention was purely to tell people what my beliefs are—equal rights for all—but there isn't much more to say."¹⁸⁹ Robson models the post-homoglobalism LGB affirmation, by protesting homophobia without ever uttering a phrase in

¹⁸⁸ Fagan, "Fagan."

¹⁸⁹ "New Look but Same Outcome for Robson Who Departs in Defeat."

support of gay fans or players. Removed from the highly specific context, her words and actions are meaningless. There was much more to say, but to do so would have meant to wade into much more political and controversial waters, a precarious situation for a starlet hoping to draw in major global sponsors and appearance fees. That is to say nothing of the pressures inherent to her position as a teenaged girl abroad, challenging one of the host nation's greatest icons and on political grounds.¹⁹⁰ Despite small on-court protests, like Robson's, Tennis Australia kept the arena name and the controversy over Court's offending remarks quickly fizzled out. She received little international media attention for the following five years.

When Margaret Court announced her plans to boycott Qantas over the CEO's support for gay marriage, it was initially ignored by the larger tennis community until out-lesbian, white, Australian player Casey Dellacqua brought it to international attention. She tweeted: "Margaret. Enough is enough." and included a picture of an editorial Court published in center-right newspaper *The Australian* four years earlier. After Dellacqua announced her partner gave birth to their first child, Court penned the piece to say it saddens her to see a baby that "been deprived of his father" and explained that she wants to "champion the rights of the family over the rights of the individual to engineer social norms and produce children into their relationships."¹⁹¹ When Court's old article circulated in response to her Qantas boycott, the top Australian player Samantha Stosur hinted that she would consider boycotting the arena named in Court's honor. The suggestion was quickly

¹⁹⁰ The long-term impact of this minor protest early in her career did not have a noteworthy impact, as a series of injuries would soon derail her envisioned trajectory to super-stardom. This included a wrist injury with a subsequent surgery that sidelined her for 17 months and two hip surgeries in later years that made it difficult to compete with the consistency needed to climb the ranking ladder. "Laura Robson."

¹⁹¹ Rothenberg, "Players Want Margaret Court Arena Renamed Over Remarks on Gays."

picked up by other players, including top ranked men's player, British Andy Murray, who suggested Tennis Australia should pre-empt any boycott by quickly renaming the facility. Murray, a self-identified LGB ally who had just recently ended his coaching relationship with Amelie Mauresmo, weighed in on the marriage debate saying, "I don't see why anyone has a problem with two people who love each other getting married." Other top men's and women's players from Australia, the U.S., and Western Europe largely shared the same basic sentiment that a loving couple in a monogamous relationship should be accepted and legally recognized.

The various public statements to support Dellacqua, players are indicative of post-homo-globalism. They speak freely against hate and support equality and love but stop short of advocating for any actionable change. In fact, they are only advocating for the change of a name, of labels, and not demanding accountability like protections for lesbian players come out proud without fear of losing endorsements, appearance fees, or Olympic team assignments.

As one of only three lesbian legends of the sport, Navratilova weighed in on the debate. She penned an open letter published in Australia's paper of record, the centrist *Sydney Morning Herald*. In the letter, she pivots the focus from any specific incident of homophobia to a broad "vitriol" by bringing Court's racism into the conversation. Navratilova does this with the mention of Court's praise of apartheid in South Africa in the 1970s, after Black American player Arthur Ashe was denied a visa to play there. Echoing an approach shared by others commenting on the controversy, Navratilova pauses to "celebrate free speech" ideology before further speaking out against Court's hate speech. Navratilova concludes the letter with the suggestion the arena be renamed for Evonne Goolagong, saying

“Now there is a person we can all celebrate. On every level.”¹⁹² Goolagong was the second most successful woman in Australia’s tennis history, with 14 Grand Slam singles titles to her name. The Aboriginal Australian married mother of two, retired in 1983 and went on to invest much of her time and energy into advocating for Indigenous youths. Rhetorically, Navratilova attempted to show the vitriol was always part of Court’s person, even in her playing career. Her letter refused any suggestion that recent homophobic comments have no bearing on the Court’s legacy and what it means for Tennis Australia to honor her with an arena.

Trying to separate the player from the personality in an apparent attempt to appease all sides, the namesake arena’s official Twitter account distanced itself from Court in familiar language of inclusion. The arena representation, effectively a subsidiary of Tennis Australia, announced it would “remain an organization committed to embracing equality, diversity and inclusion; from our fans to our colleagues who deliver the events that people love to attend.” Tennis Australia issued a nearly identical statement on their letterhead as well, saying that Court’s views do not align with their “values of equality, inclusion and diversity.”¹⁹³ The limits of these values and how they could be expressed were tested by Navratilova and men’s legend John McEnroe a few years later, as Court continued to publicly make homophobic remarks despite soft rebukes from the Australian tennis establishment.

At the 2020 Australian Open, Navratilova and McEnroe were censored and rebuked by Tennis Australia for mounting a small protest against the honors Court continued to

¹⁹² Navratilova, “An Open Letter from Martina Navratilova to Margaret Court Arena.”

¹⁹³ Rothenberg, “Players Want Margaret Court Arena Renamed Over Remarks on Gays.”

receive. After a match, the pair stepped on court and held up a handmade banner reading “Evonne Goolagong Arena.” Navratilova climbed onto an umpire’s chair to speak into a microphone, but the feed was quickly cut just after she finished saying: “I’ve been speaking out about an issue for a while now and John McEnroe is here to join me and push the conversation forward.” In an article she published on Tennis.com, she elaborated:

“In our tennis ‘family’, we celebrate the good values of our sport and we love how democratic and inclusive it has become, the way it has driven out prejudice and unfair exclusion. Yes, we have free speech in a democracy, but that doesn’t mean that free speech doesn’t have consequences. When Margaret goes out of her way to single out a group of people and tell them they don’t deserve equal rights, that they are less than good parents, that they are not godly, that’s not merely free speech. It’s hateful and hurtful speech and it’s injurious to countless vulnerable people.”¹⁹⁴

McEnroe put out an additional statement demonstrating how long Court had been making hateful statements and naming the communities she hurts with them:

“There’s only one thing longer than the list of Margaret Court’s tennis achievements: it’s her list of offensive and homophobic statements. Just a few examples. During the apartheid regime in South Africa, she said: ‘I love South Africa. They have the racial situation better organised than anyone else.’ What? About transgender children and LGBTIQ: ‘It’s all the work of the devil ... tennis is full of lesbians ... it is sad for children to be exposed to homosexuality.’”¹⁹⁵

In what was perhaps a predictable turn of events, Navratilova and McEnroe did face consequences for their free speech.

Citing non-specific rules and protocols, Tennis Australia admonished the pair, suggesting the protest might have damaged the integrity of the event by violating the

¹⁹⁴ Mitchell, “Martina Navratilova Takes Fight On-Court for Name Change to Evonne Goolagong Arena.”

¹⁹⁵ Mitchell.

regulations for how to use the “global stage” provided by the tournament. In a statement, organizers claimed, “We embrace diversity, inclusion and the right for people to have a view, as well as their right to voice that view” but said the “two high-profile guests have breached these protocols and we are working through this with them.”¹⁹⁶ The apparent line drawn that made Court’s free speech disagreeable but permissible and McEnroe and Navratilova’s protest unacceptable was in its staging on the contested grounds of Melbourne Park. Whereas Court had the decorum of voicing her vitriol on talk radio and in letters to the editor, the widely shared imagery of the two protestors standing on a blue hard court with a handmade banner crossed the line of how calls for inclusions and diversity can be made. The response mirrored Collin Kaepernick’s political opponents who expressed he could be an activist but ought to keep that separate from his work as a football player.¹⁹⁷

Like other tournaments, the Australian Open is enmeshed in a vast complex of global stakeholders who finance the event. Major global corporations such as South Korean car maker Kia and Swiss watch maker Rolex pay to have their names displayed courtside along with regional businesses like ANZ Bank. Food and beverage sponsors like American Häagen-Dazs and Italian Aperol pay for exclusive rights to sell their products on site. Emirates Airlines poses veiled women dressed as flight attendants to hand out branded souvenirs on the grounds. Emirates, a major sponsor in many sports, is owned by the government of Dubai. As a state-owned business from the United Arab Emirates, it faces the same predicament Mubadala and Abu Dhabi did in the San Jose tournament. Television

¹⁹⁶ Mitchell.

¹⁹⁷ For more about Collin Kaepernick’s protests and the response, see Coaston, “2 Years of NFL Protests, Explained.”

networks, some privately and others publicly owned, buy broadcast rights for their respective markets. Fans buy tickets to go watch their favorite players on court.

This entanglement represents another dimension within which to situate various protests. In 2018, a smaller court next to Margaret Court Arena, previously known as Show Court 2, was renamed the 1573 Arena for a Chinese distillery. While the exact terms of the contract are not public, officials compared it to a sponsorship contract with Kia, which is estimated to be worth US\$60M over five years and does not include naming rights.¹⁹⁸ It was on this court, that Navratilova and McEnroe lodged their protest. Consequently, 1573 was mentioned in every story about the protest critiquing Tennis Australia's court naming practices. Although logos did not happen to be visible in the commonly shared images of the protest, an Emirates logo could have easily slipped in, putting Tennis Australia into an awkward position with a sponsor. Protests on site represent a threat to the delicate ecosystem of stakeholders. Decrying the protests to assure sponsors while distancing themselves from Court's hate to appease gay tennis fans, Tennis Australia tried to strike a politically prudent pose, which was to feign apoliticism and call for decorum and polite discourse.

Tennis Australia's statements and actions lay out clear boundaries intended to evacuate tennis of politics. Rather than taking a stand on Court's statements, they take a stand on the overt politicization of the sport. Whereas Laura Robson's rainbow hairband protest was so subtle as to be virtually undetectable, Navratilova and McEnroe's protest was unambiguous with a clearly stated reasoning and suggested remedy. While Robson, in her words, wanted to show she personally stood for equality and nothing more, the legends

¹⁹⁸ Carp, "Australian Open's New Chinese Deal 'in the Same Ballpark' as US\$60m Kia Sponsorship - SportsPro Media."

demanded a clear and specific remedy from Tennis Australia. They posed a direct challenge to the sport's institutions.

Conclusion: Love-All

The Women's Tennis Association website's "about" page paints a picture of diversity and women's equality. The first sentence boasts, Billie Jean King founded the organization "on the principle of equal opportunity for women in sports, the WTA is the global leader in women's professional sport with more than 1,650 players representing 84 nations competing for a record \$180 million in prize money."¹⁹⁹ The opening paragraph mentions the "Shiseido WTA Finals Shenzhen," highlighting a Japanese sponsor and Chinese host. The history frequently refers to Philip Morris and Virginia Slims, a tobacco conglomerate, without which the tour may never have gotten off the ground to become the global brand it is today. Some other sponsors casually mentioned in the bullet pointed timeline include Dubai Duty Free, a state-owned retailer from Dubai, Sony Ericsson, Colgate, Toyota, and Kraft General Foods. The "about" page culminates with logos and links to the top "global partners:" Dubai Duty Free, Chinese video sharing site iQiyi, Porsche, and German software company SAP. Taken as a whole, the page tells a deep truth about the WTA: although the principle of equality is primary in its branding, the foundation the tour is built on is a vast network of global corporations.

Neoliberalism created a niche market out of the LGBTQ community, a market that is certainly embraced by the tour, but one that is embraced quietly. When all goes well, the various stakeholders like players, officials, fans, media, and sponsors unite behind the brand

¹⁹⁹ "About the WTA."

of *the tour*, but in moments of scandal the various factions and their interests become newly visible. When early backer Avon did not renew its sponsorship contract underwriting the WTA after Billie Jean King was outed in 1981 a tone was set to keep sexuality quiet. Careful not to upset the delicate ecosystem of money flows between corporations, federations, and fans, the tour has embraced a post-homo-globalist approach to sexuality. The “don’t ask don’t tell” has made space for inventive ways for players and tournaments to signal their support for LGBT fans, or consumers rather, without ever having to say any words that might name gay people and their relationships. Scandals, like outings, blatant homophobia, and protest are ruptures that force stakeholders to reckon with sexuality in the marketplace of global tennis.

How sexuality has been handled at the elite levels of women’s professional tennis is indicative of a broader struggle in the sport to balance the Euro-American liberal brand with apolitical appeal in a global marketplace. As detailed in the Introduction’s pre-history, many women, led by Billie Jean King, took major risks to build the tour into the best funded women’s sports organization in the world. As Chapter 1 showed, however, gender equality is still being battled for. Whereas it focused on the labor of tennis and funding from the perspective of tournaments to players, Chapter 2 was more concerned with where the funding comes from and the impact this has on the women’s tennis culture. In both cases, the women workers were limited in their expression and earning potential by powerful outside interests. I touched briefly on how rules and decorum were cited as an ostensibly apolitical mechanism to silence Martina Navratilova and John McEnroe’s protests. Turning the tables on Navratilova, Chapter 3 considers how she once used rules to silence another player. Grunting, a natural part of many players’ game has been increasingly contested as a

question of rule interpretation and enforcement, whereas I argue it is a debate over a woman's freedom to dominate a soundscape.

Chapter 3

Policing the Grunt:

Performing Femininity in a Soundscape

“What do I think? I don’t think, that’s my whole opinion. I don’t think about what my mouth does when I play out there.”

- Maria Sharapova²⁰⁰

Tennis is a quiet sport with loud punctuation. When live audiences clap for more than a few seconds, the chair umpire politely announces, “thank you, ladies and gentlemen,” to tell people in the stadium it is time to settle down. The soundscape of tennis is the ball making contact with the racket and the sneakers shuffling and sliding on the court. Audiences might cheer briefly between points, but any such disruption during play can quickly lead to expulsion from the stadium. Sometimes, another sound rings out during play. It has been referred to as grunting, shrieking, and moaning. The sound that many tennis players make when they strike through the ball is often described in colorful terms that elicit excitement, sexual arousal, violence, and repulsion. It is not typically described in the terms of the conventional, white femininity of upper-class private clubs that the sport is frequently associated with. Although players of all genders grunt, the vocal emission consistently draws more ire when it comes from women. When women athletes refuse to be quiet and their bodies refuse to be docile, their peers, fans, and media police them through public shaming. However, for a player to suppress grunting not only denies a natural part of how the body functions, it requires additional attention and somatic control. I argue that efforts to police grunting seek to enhance femininity in women’s tennis at the expense of

²⁰⁰ Sharapova, Australian Open Press Conference.

performance, by asking athletes to assume a disharmonious condition in which her conscious mind must alter her body's natural functions.

In the setting of a professional tennis match, the refusal to self-discipline is a rebellion against a fundamental method of social control. Writing about the transition from punishing people by banishing them to a dark dungeon to a system of individualized disciplining, Foucault described a Panopticon in which “each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible.”²⁰¹ The sports stadium intensifies this mechanism by creating a space of unquestionable hyper surveillance. The stadium design induces in players what Foucault might describe as “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.”²⁰² The player stands surrounded by as many as twenty thousand people in seats designed to optimize how well they see and hear the action. Half a dozen broadcast cameras are pointed at the players, to say nothing of the countless smartphones in the stands. Microphones on the court link directly to a world feed for international media broadcast. In a singles tennis match, two players are separated by a net, with each half of the court acting as an individual cell in which they are prohibited from communicating with anybody other than staff and officials. Any failure to self-discipline in this setting is sure to be noticed and documented, and so any breach of rules or expectations reads as wanton disregard of them.

Players who grunt prominently and have done so since being childhood players, like Monica Seles and Maria Sharapova—the Godmother of Grunt and Shriekapova the Siberian Siren according to NBC's veteran tennis reporter Bud Collins in 2007—describe the sound

²⁰¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200.

²⁰² Foucault, 201.

as an involuntary emission their bodies make during practice and play.²⁰³ Over the course of their decades-long careers, they could never shake the bullying from tabloid press or allegations of gamesmanship from opponents and spectators. Some quieter competitors have alleged that loud grunting is a deliberate tactic, deployed to distract and obscure the auditory input needed for fully immersed anticipatory play.²⁰⁴ Spectators have weighed in with in-stadium jeers and online comments to express their disgust. Fans and tabloid media have compared the sounds to childbirth, sex, and animal sounds.²⁰⁵ The players who grunt loudly have claimed that any attempts to silence themselves significantly impact their performance negatively.²⁰⁶ They prefer to put their athletic success ahead of both likeability and an infantilizing femininity that demands a woman be seen but not heard. The public shaming that players endure in the form of occasional heckling and frequent negative publicity functions as a punishment for women who make a mark on the soundscape and refuse to be quiet.

I use somaesthetics to connect the different strands of discussion happening in the tennis world and show that attempts to regulate grunting are attempts to punish women who have prioritized physical power over docility. Analyzing how Simone de Beauvoir works through the impact of embodiment on gender hierarchy, Richard Shusterman, who coined the term somaesthetics, explains “the established aesthetic ideology of the female body

²⁰³ Collins, “Shriek Cheats, the Rebels Yell.”

²⁰⁴ For examples of how grunting is discussed by players, fans and media, see Collins (2007) and Belson (April 2, 2012). Although there are men who grunt at the same volume as women, with few exceptions they have not received the same negative attention as women who grunt do, neither from spectators nor opponents. On acoustic difference in men’s and women’s tennis grunts, see Raine, Pisanski, and Reby (2017).

²⁰⁵ Hinds, “Rising Russian Has the Grunt to Be a Big Noise at Wimbledon.”

²⁰⁶ Collins, “Shriek Cheats, the Rebels Yell.”

serves to reinforce female weakness, passivity, and meekness, while such submissiveness is reciprocally used to justify the permanent and natural rightness of the traditional feminine aesthetic and the ‘myth’ of the ‘Eternal Feminine.’”²⁰⁷ The expectation to be meek is inherently at odds with expectations placed on competitive athletes. In tennis, grunting is one site where femininity is contested and policed. The grunt is rebellious because it announces that a woman will not be passive, but instead she is aggressive, bold, and will fight for the win. She rejects femininity and, in so doing, refuses to reinforce the mechanism that is used to justify the gender hierarchy. With each grunt she loudly emits through a stroke, she puts her somaesthetic practice ahead of femininity and male dominance.

Weakening Women

The Women’s Tennis Association tour’s success has historical roots in tennis being a socially acceptable past time for middle-class women in an era that other sports were not. That was achieved largely by building a reputation on femininity. To be both commercially viable and draw in talent, women’s sports have long worked to assert their femininity and those that succeeded have reason to be defensive of it. As leisure culture reached the American masses early in the twentieth century, organized sports for women had to fight against backlash that it was unhealthy or morally degrading.²⁰⁸ To fight for acceptance, groups such as the Amateur Athletic Union used a eugenicist claim that it boosted a women’s reproductive capacity; other women’s sporting events featured a beauty contest

²⁰⁷ Shusterman, *Body Consciousness*, 86.

²⁰⁸ Cahn, “From the ‘Muscle Moll’ to the ‘Butch’ Ballplayer”; Lenskyj, *Out of Bounds*.

component to show that athletics did not compromise womanhood.²⁰⁹ Through those and more subtle efforts, women's sports found broader acceptability and by 1972 Title IX was passed.²¹⁰ At that time, large scale women's sports in the US were in part enabled by assuring concerned citizens that participation would not cause mannishness or expose girls to lesbianism. Building a brand on the backs of conventionally attractive white, hetero-feminine women like Christ Evert and Tracy Austin, tennis was one of the most successful sports at convincing the public it would not degrade a girl's morals or body. Femininity was so essential to how the WTA viewed its success story that when founder Billie Jean King was outed as a lesbian in 1981, there was reasonable concern that it could ruin the commercial success of the WTA tour and harm youth enrollment in the sport.²¹¹ By being marketed as the feminine alternative to other popular sports, such as soccer, softball, and basketball, women's in tennis drew large audiences, major sponsors, and consistently offered higher prize money than other women's sport. By producing athletes as global brands and paying men and women equally at the biggest tournaments, tennis has positioned itself as the most lucrative sport for women. In 2019, all ten of the highest paid women athletes in the world were tennis players.²¹² These conditions have created a tour culture that

²⁰⁹ Cahn, "From the 'Muscle Moll' to the 'Butch' Ballplayer," 346.

²¹⁰ Title IX is US federal legislation to ensure: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance." For relevance to sports, see Heywood and Dworkin, *Built to Win*..

²¹¹ Howard, *The Rivals*, 2006, 177.

²¹² The world's top ten earning female athletes, all tennis players, include three US Americans and one person each from seven different nations Badenhausen, "The Highest-Paid Female Athletes 2019: Serena And Osaka Dominate."

places tremendous value on femininity, and a formal and informal network through which it is policed.²¹³

Grunting arose as a prominent site to contest femininity in tennis in the early nineties alongside the rise of Monica Seles's ranking. As the teenager began to dominate tournaments, rattled veteran players did what they could to get her off their lawn. The British tabloids, notorious in the tennis world for their brutal and personal attacks, brought "grunt-o-meters" to her matches, *Saturday Night Live* wrote sketches mocking her and competitors began to complain that she was violating the hindrance rule.²¹⁴ All the conversations and controversy about her grunting came to a head at Wimbledon in 1992, where prominent player of the old guard, 35-year-old Martina Navratilova, was the first to lodge a formal complaint against Seles for grunting. Navratilova herself was a quieter player but had not shown concern with Seles sounds in their prior meetings and had not complained about the more vocal players in her generation, like Chris Evert. However, Navratilova's position appeared to change after 18-year-old Seles took the lead in that semi-final. Navratilova chose to complain to the chair umpire after Seles won the first set and they played a second set tie break; this is to say the match had been going on for some time and Seles was potentially within a few points from victory. The umpire asked Seles to quiet down or risk a point penalty for creating a distraction. Seles did win the match in a third set,

²¹³ This chapter is concerned specifically with how femininity is policed in this space, but men's tennis players also face gender specific expectations to perform masculinity, which are surveilled and enforced by the same and other mechanism. For more on masculinity in sport, see Pringle (2005).

²¹⁴ Seles, *Getting a Grip*, 85.

but would later describe that she was distressed and tried to hold her breath through each point.²¹⁵

The mental impact of being rebuked on court was apparent in Seles's next match. In her championship match against Steffi Graf, who was five years her senior and struggling to maintain dominance in the sport, Seles again forced herself to remain quiet for fear of repercussions, and this time lost the match. The *New York Times* headline the next day noted the change in the soundscape, saying "Seles Bows Out Quietly as Graf Retains Title."²¹⁶ The teen had already been punished with an admonishment from one of the sport's icons and a warning from the sport's governing body. She then suffered another indignity being mocked by the international press in defeat. Players, officials, and media representatives all worked to silence Seles and ensure she knows the way of playing that comes naturally to her is unacceptable to other interests. Collectively, they enforced a message that women should not be proclaiming their presence in the soundscape.

Seles later described her self-disciplining under public pressure at the Wimbledon final as one of the biggest regrets in her life. Reflecting on the episode, she contends that her obsession with shutting down the grunting and the resulting change to her breathing and mental state cost her a critical match. The gendered dynamic of pleasing others is clear in how she would later speak about her attempts to play quietly: "I did as instructed [...] I didn't want everyone to be angry with me."²¹⁷ In that tournament, one of the most promising talents in the sport so deeply feared that a failure to discipline her body would lead to further

²¹⁵ Seles, 86.

²¹⁶ Finn, "Seles Bows Out Quietly as Graf Retains Title."

²¹⁷ Finn, 85.

negative reaction from players, officials, fans, and media that she put her likeability ahead of playing her best tennis. On the hyper-surveilled center court, she followed instructions to please the many individuals and institutions behind the surveillance, self-disciplining herself into defeat.

The desire to please others at the expense of her own success is an essential quality of conventional, white, Western femininity and is at odds with the conventions of competitive sports. In 1973, the same year Monica Seles was born and Billie Jean King formed the WTA, Thomas Boslooper and Marcia Hayes published the popular press sports book *The Femininity Game*. They argue that to win at what today might be described more specifically as a white-cis-hetero femininity, a woman essentially must lose at everything else: “Ladies are supposed to be supportive, passive, unaggressive, even frail [...] Having been taught that ‘winning’ means losing love, girls usually find that achievement is accompanied by anxiety.”²¹⁸ Eighteen years after publication, little had changed when Seles was shamed into submission by the unambiguous messaging that she would forgo the love of tennis audiences if she continued to grunt loudly. Seles’s anxiety led her to play in a more passive, frail manner that caused her to lose. In the moment that she decided to grunt less, media, opponents, officials, and audiences successfully shamed her into putting femininity ahead of winning on the court.

Supporting Seles’s claims that playing quietly cost her the match, research in sports physiology shows that grunting improves a tennis player’s performance and directly correlates with the power of their shots. A study with competitive collegiate players found that when a player grunts through a forehand or serve, they increase the ball velocity by

²¹⁸ Boslooper and Hayes, *The Femininity Game*, 17–19.

nearly 5% and players' isometric force increases around 20%.²¹⁹ In tennis, the pectoral muscles are critical to swinging the racket and powering through the ball strike; these muscles hug the rib cage and also play a role in loud vocal expression. Their bodies are not built to allow for full strength explosive movement through the shot without also making the sound. Not only is a player's mental game disrupted when they are asked to quiet down, but they are essentially asked to weaken themselves in a somatic way. To maximize the power and control over some muscles, the body surrenders control over others. The researchers point to other studies that evaluated grunting in various sporting and exertion contexts and explain: "voluntary contraction of lower limb muscles causes disinhibition of upper limb motor areas."²²⁰ Choosing to keep grunting loudly, as Seles did in later matches, was a rebellion against femininity because it was a declaration that she will no longer put her likeability ahead of power.

Hindering Women

The tension between what constitutes a voluntary muscle contraction and what is a collateral disinhibited action is crucial to interpreting tennis rules and whether loud grunts constitute a violation. Although there are several different rulebooks to govern various types of tennis tournaments, all share a hindrance rule to punish a player who behaves in a way that prevents the other from playing their best. The four Grand Slam tournaments, which include Wimbledon, are governed by the International Tennis Federation's Rules of Tennis, which state: "If a player is hindered in playing the point by a deliberate act of the

²¹⁹ O'Connell et al., "The Effects of 'Grunting' on Serve and Forehand Velocities in Collegiate Tennis Players," 3473.

²²⁰ O'Connell et al., 3473.

opponent(s), the player shall win the point.”²²¹ While the current ITF rules do not make any reference to grunting, the WTA tournament rules that apply to tour level women’s professional tournaments specify: “Any continual distraction of regular play, such as grunting, shall be dealt with in accordance with the Hindrance Rule.”²²² That rule, however, is itself vague when determining what constitutes a violation. Hindrance, according to the WTA, is defined circularly as an incident in which “a player hinders her opponent.” The chair umpire can rule this as either involuntary or deliberate. Involuntary hindrance is typically called in such cases as a player allowing their hat or a spare ball to fall onto the court during play. By WTA rules, the first incident receives a warning and failure to prevent reoccurrence is then ruled as a deliberate hindrance. The WTA rulebook does not include a direct definition of deliberate.

The grunting rule is explicitly gendered, as the men’s tour rulebook makes no mention of the sound, but it does define how deliberate is used in the sport’s rules. The Association for Tennis Professionals (ATP) rulebook says, “Deliberate is defined as the player meant to do what it was that caused the hindrance or distraction.”²²³ In 1992, when Navratilova levelled accusations against Seles, the Wimbledon rules did not specify grunting, but the WTA rule for hindrance stated that “continual distraction of regular play such as grunting.”²²⁴ Since a certain amount of grunting is common, the chair umpires and tournament referees have discretion to determine not only what is voluntary or deliberate,

²²¹ *2019 ITF Rules of Tennis.*

²²² *2019 WTA Official Rulebook*, 113.

²²³ *2019 ATP Official Rulebook.*

²²⁴ *1992 WTA Official Rulebook.*

but also what rises to the occasion of being called a hindrance.²²⁵ Just as some players might have a different threshold for what amount of grunting they consider a hindrance to their own performance, umpires and referees can interpret rules differently. With time on the tour, players get to know the officials, their preferences, and how strict they are about rules that allow more room for interpretation.²²⁶

In the case of grunting, chair umpires have the power to bring a violation into being when they choose to declare the sound a hindrance. Comparative literature scholar Yago Colás explains in his analysis of professional basketball that when it comes to personal fouls in basketball, referees bring the foul into being when they blow a whistle. He argues that “physical contact is merely physical contact and is neither legal nor illegal until the referee *makes it* illegal [...] whenever the referee blows a whistle to call a foul, he brings not only the rules but also their entire supporting structure to bear on the players and the game they are playing.”²²⁷ I build on this to argue that in tennis, a grunt is not a hindrance until an umpire declares it is. In that moment, the umpire brings the weight of all the sport’s governing bodies to bear on the body of the woman standing in the middle of the stadium. The correction of her behavior, the admonishment for her intrusion into the soundscape is

²²⁵ Under ITF rules, the chair umpire is the final authority on tennis law during the match; however, players who disagree with the umpire’s interpretation may call the referee to court. Referees are the final authority on tennis law and their decisions are final. For more detailed information, see Appendix VI of the ITF Rules of Tennis.

²²⁶ The far-ranging discretion afforded officials became clear after a highly publicized controversial call against Serena Williams at the 2018 US Open. Umpire Carlos Ramos, known among players to be a stickler for rules, gave Williams a warning for coaching after her coach motioned with his hands. Ramos gave Williams a point and a game penalty for subsequent conduct violations. In response to the incident and surrounding controversy, the sport’s governing bodies have since removed Ramos from her and sister Venus Williams’ matches Clarey, “Umpire Who Clashed With Serena Williams Won’t Work Her Matches.”

²²⁷ Colás, *Ball Don’t Lie! Myth, Genealogy, and Invention in the Cultures of Basketball*, 4.

carries the weight of the structure she depends on for her livelihood. She is reminded it is not her space to dominate, but that she must obey and be passive or face penalty.

The umpire is able to create the violation using the powers of the institution, therefore, it is logically impossible for the player to contest the virtue of the ruling. The umpire declaring a grunt to be a hindrance is a declarative illocutionary speech act, which separates it from other, more common violations. For example, in the case of a line call, where the ball was with certainty either in or out, there is potential for certainty and clarity. Video review, if cameras with the right frame rate are placed correctly, can determine whether a violation occurred. The power resides in the player to keep the ball inside the lines and failure to do so is clearly their responsible. In the case of a personal foul or hindrance by grunting, the violation has not occurred until it was declared as such. The hierarchical structures of tennis that empower the umpire to determine what is and is not hindrance are fully present on court when he or she uses the power of the position to make a judgment on a subjective case like grunting. Whereas players have the right to challenge line calls and ask for laser or camera measurement analysis where available, there is no process to contest violations like hindrance or racket abuse. In effect, the umpire has made the grunt into a hindrance and at the moment of the declarative illocutionary speech act, it is not feasible deny its truth.

The mechanisms of disciplining bodies, such as the hindrance rule, are a means to strip people of their power. Prohibitions against loud grunting are an explicit attempt to force women's bodies into docility. Writing about the perfect soldier, Foucault describes the modality of docile bodies, "implies an uninterrupted, constant coercion, supervising the

processes of the activity rather than its result.”²²⁸ Suppressing grunting requires the player’s attention be directed to their breathing in a manner that takes away from concentrating on the outcome of the ball strike. For the umpire, attending to whether or not a grunt is reasonable distracts from everything else they must attend to on the court. Rather than a soldier owning their strength, their docility gives that power over to those who they are subject to. On their own, women’s tennis players are powerful women. However, when they are disciplined, they no longer own their power. When a tennis official forces a player to be docile, they are explicitly stripping them of their power and giving it over to the sport’s governing bodies. The tennis match becomes secondary to the focus on policing women.

Players who grunt loudly liken grunting to breathing and claim it is a sound their body *naturally* makes if they are not focusing on active suppression. While terms like voluntary and deliberate are ill defined in tennis law, they have specific meanings in physiology, referring to the neurological mechanisms behind actions. Physiologically speaking, involuntary refers to such functions as digesting food or the heart beating. Involuntary actions are operated by the autonomic nervous system and they run without conscious decision making and typically cannot be overridden. A person cannot choose to stop their heart from beating or make it beat on command. Deliberate actions performed by skeletal muscles, like running and moving an arm, are controlled by the somatic nervous system and are considered voluntary. Breathing, and I argue grunting, can be controlled by either system but always fall back on the autonomic system when not actively intervened upon. When a person inhales deeply, the somatic nervous system activates skeletal muscles that would not be invoked by regular, subconscious breathing. Muscles in the abdomen,

²²⁸ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 137.

chest, and neck are called upon to complete that task. A person can choose to hold their breath, but the somatic nervous system has limited power to endanger its own organism at will. Before a person can suffocate themselves by choosing not to breathe, the autonomic nervous system will force inhalation in a way that ordinary people do not have the nervous control to override.²²⁹ Consciously controlling a natural process by making the somatic and autonomic nervous systems work against each other creates discord inside the player and is detrimental to their performance. For a player to function their best, the mind and body must be in harmony. As long as women players are expected to suppress grunts, they are expected to suppress harmonious functioning for the sake of another's aesthetic experience.

With the high stakes brought on by tennis' single elimination tournament structure, a player might be more disinhibited and less concerned with how she looks or sounds on court. Working harder in clutch moments, she surrenders control of the body functions involved in grunting to involuntary systems. In either case, there are reasonable explanations for loud grunting at critical moments that are indicative of involuntary behavior. Both the physiological and social understandings of disinhibition are premised on the woman prioritizing a way of being and acting that is directly an affront to conventional femininity defined in part by inhibiting oneself. Portuguese player Michelle Larcher De Brito exemplified how physical performance can correlate with grunting when movement and sound function harmoniously. After her breakthrough in 2009, her loud grunting became the central topic of discussion for her at press conferences, where the media's badgering participated in public shaming. At one point, Wimbledon's communication staff, who moderate press conferences, had to repeatedly instruct the press pool to limit their questions

²²⁹ To learn more about the nervous system, see chapters 7 and 8 of *Human Physiology* Fox, *Human Physiology*..

to the match and not ask about the sound she makes. But media questions continued, and De Brito simply explained: “The grunt goes through my intensity [...] I mean, you play, and the grunt goes itself. Like if my body feels like it needs to grunt more, it grunts. If not, it stays quiet [...] It is my mind, my body. It’s just how the match goes. I just grunt.”²³⁰ De Brito here echoes what researchers have observed.²³¹ The grunt mirrors a player’s intensity but does so in an unconscious way. At clutch moments, when the intensity of shots is raised, some players can play with greater disinhibition, both in the social-psychological and physiological senses that can increase grunting.

While players who grunt argue it is a natural part of their somaesthetic practice, some of their opponents describe it as a hindrance see it as a disruption to *their own* somaesthetic practice. In 2018, the world number one Caroline Wozniacki interrupted a match against Monica Niculescu when they were tied at 4-4 in the first set, to approach the chair umpire and demand he ask her opponent to quiet down. The umpire told Wozniacki, “that’s your opinion, and my opinion is she’s playing regular.”²³² With cameras rolling and the microphones hot, she tried to convince him otherwise, going so far as to imitate the grunt and cite the rules, alleging that the prolonged sound extending into the timing of her return shot indicated it was tactical. After winning the match, Wozniacki continued her criticism, telling press that, “obviously she’s a player that tries to get into your head [...] It’s disturbing. It’s in the rules that they’re not supposed to do that so I was just making sure the

²³⁰ Larcher de Brito, Wimbledon Press Conference.

²³¹ Raine, Pisanski, and Reby, “Tennis Grunts Communicate Acoustic Cues to Sex and Contest Outcome.”

²³² *Wozniacki Imitates Niculescu Grunt.*

umpire was paying attention to that.”²³³ Wozniacki’s specific claim that grunting was a deployed tactically disturb her mental focus by getting into her head speaks to the somaesthetics of tennis. The player views herself as most effective and athlete when she can experience and cultivate a coherent and cohesive self in the soma, without the penetration of another’s intention to disrupt her practice. Being fully present and focused in the match is crucial in any competitive sport with slim margins and opponents who are trained to identify and exploit any weakness.

Players who compete at an elite level of the professional tours, like other top athletes, have developed sport-specific neural networks that allow them to process information at much quicker rates than a recreational player could. These top athletes are believed to rely largely on a computational motor control forward model that allows them to act and react faster than sensory feedback delays would allow in ordinary motor command.²³⁴ Simply put, the greats of any sport have developed quicker anticipation and decision-making skills that bypass parts of the brain casual athletes use for processing. The predicative computational models coursing through a tennis player with all senses firing during a match are built on the predictability of the sensory inputs that a player knows from experience. The slow changing of light over the court as time passes, the tacky grip of a fresh racket grabbed on a changeover, or the thwack of a felt ball launching off the rackets. Ball trajectories, spin, and the opponent’s movements must be processed rapidly while a player runs from one end of the court to the other chasing down the ball and deciding where to return it to, all while anticipating where it will land when the opponent returns it. Players

²³³ Wozniacki, Qatar Total Open Press Conference.

²³⁴ Yarrow, Brown, and Krakauer, “Inside the Brain of an Elite Athlete,” 586.

get to tournament sites early to calibrate their game for how the courts play, to adjust to how heavy balls feel, variably depending on brand, humidity, and altitude, and to get a sense of how the air and sun move over the courts throughout the day. Making these adjustments before competitive play begins allows players to rely more on their automated systems in play and fully immerse themselves in the game when it matters.

An opponent who grunts louder than average or at a different pitch than anticipated can create disrupt the sensory cues needed to anticipate the ball's trajectory. Confirming what critics like Wozniacki say of the grunt, research trials have revealed hearing that sound from across the net does inhibit a player's ability to predict how deep the ball will go.²³⁵ The sound can both be such a distraction that it stops a player's flow and, on top of, that mask critical sensory information that players uses to make decisions under the quick paced forward computational model. Deciding how to most effectively return a ball relies on what researchers call multisensory integration, where visual and auditory input are processed to help predict ball trajectory and allow a player to get into position to return.²³⁶ For example, if a loud grunt makes a player think a ball is going deep, they might position themselves several feet behind the baseline and wind up their racket behind them, whereas if they anticipate a weaker shot, they may move further in and attempt a shorter swing. Wozniacki's suggestion that Niculescu was grunting to get into her head, alleged intentionality aside, makes sense from a neurological perspective. The grunts made Wozniacki question her judgement and movement on the court, throwing her off balance when her senses were obscured. WTA players' first serves frequently leave the racket at an excess of 100 mph to

²³⁵ Cañal-Bruland et al., "Auditory Contributions to Visual Anticipation in Tennis."

²³⁶ Cañal-Bruland et al., 102.

bounce before the opposing service line only 60 feet away. With such slim margins, any miscalculation in predicting a ball's trajectory is detrimental to performance but also disorienting to the listener who has to question the judgement they spent a lifetime training for.

In no uncertain terms, the 2019 year-end number one, Australian Ashleigh Barty, told members of the press that grunting is an ordinary part of the soundscape that players must accept. After defeating Aryna Sabalenka, a player known for her loud grunts, at the 2018 Australian Open, Barty stated: "A lot of players grunt. A lot of players don't grunt. It's just the way they are, the way they play. For me, it wasn't a distraction [...] I think if something that small can irritate you, that's a bigger issue in itself. I knew it was coming. I was prepared for it."²³⁷ Barty treats grunts from the other side of the net as an ordinary part of the tennis soundscape that players must prepare for, thereby suggesting that players who are rattled by another's grunt failed to adequately prepare themselves for the match. The Australian's holistic picture of what to expect on match day incorporates not only data about an opponent's serve speeds and shot selections, but other sensory challenges specific to that opponent. She understands tennis as a fully somaesthetically engaged endeavor that must be prepared for in its entirety for success. She allows for other players to do what they must for their bodies to work most harmoniously. In attributing grunting to their being, saying "that's just how they are," she implicitly addresses the rules by suggesting grunting is not deliberate as would be prohibited under hindrance rules. This mirrors what the umpire in Wozniacki's match said in defense of Niculescu, that by his interpretation it is not against the rules if the way she grunts is "regular" for her.

²³⁷Barty, Australian Open Press Conference.

Shaming Women

The way players and tabloid media can differently interpret the significance of a player's grunting became visible in the events surrounding the match that prompted Barty's comments. Referring to the "Belarusian bellow," British tabloid *The Sun* recounted she "was mocked by the Australian Open crowd as her ridiculous grunting marred an absorbing win for home favourite Ashleigh Barty."²³⁸ *The Sun* saying that Barty's victory was "marred," went to far as to appeal to audiences to oppose Sabalenka in defeat while using the language of aesthetics to describe the alleged offence. In this case, media coverage attempted to discipline Sabalenka, while her opponent attempted to neutralize not only that particular incident, but also the issue at large. In her comments to press, Barty tried to refuse a narrative that allowed the disparagement of one woman under the pretense of defending another.

Media shaming of a young player who grunts did not stop with Seles and was well established by the time Barty and Sabalenka played each other in Australia in 2018. A decade after the former rose to prominence and fifteen years before the latter faced off, Sharapova won Wimbledon and asserted herself as a competitor to be reckoned with. Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper introduced her to their readers through a series of puns mocking the sixteen-year old's on-court sounds. The headline announced the young Russian would make "big noise at Wimbledon." The article began, "Was it the soundtrack from Animal Farm? Togas-off time at a Roman orgy? A very large family of cats being strangled at two-second intervals? No, it was [...] the newly crowned queen of the grunt, Maria

²³⁸Tuckey, "Aryna Sabalenka Mocked by Australian Open Crowd for Absurd Grunting vs Ashleigh Barty."

Sharapova.”²³⁹ In just a few sentences, the teen’s vocal emissions were framed in sexual and animalistic terms. She objectified through sexualization and dehumanization. Taking away a person’s subjectivity while individualizing them is a function of the Panopticon.

Media are able to shame women players and strip them of their subjectivity and humanity as an extension of the Panopticon-like structure of the tennis stadium. By cordoning off people into separate cells, Foucault explains each individual is “the object of information, never a subject in communication.”²⁴⁰ During Grand Slam matches, players are forbidden from communicating with their coaches.²⁴¹ This deliberate isolation and silencing denies players the chance to be a subject of communication while they are on court. The match is the only component of the broadcast that is transmitted live. Press conferences, where players are ostensibly given the chance to explain themselves, are typically taped and transcribed for media to then pick and choose, or mediate, what reaches the mainstream public. In the press, grunts can be reduced to the sounds of an object, animalistic or sexual, because the structure of the sport and its media deny opportunities for her to claim subjectivity and furthermore are explicitly designed to objectify her. The grunts that can be interpreted as a rebellious act to refuse objectification are then reinscribed to become further evidence of it.

One of the biggest sponsors in tennis, Nike, has attempted to use the markedly unfeminine perception of grunting to signal the athletic power of one of their most

²³⁹Hinds, “Rising Russian Has the Grunt to Be a Big Noise at Wimbledon.”

²⁴⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200.

²⁴¹ At tour level events, players may request their coaches briefly, but both are required to wear microphones connected to the world feed for broadcast. In 2020, a trial was launched to allow coaching from the stands at WTA tour level events. The mid-match coaching ban at Grand Slams and men’s events is a tradition intended to make problem solving and match analysis part of the player’s on-court challenge.

conventionally hetero-feminine players. When Maria Sharapova rose to tennis prominence after defeating Serena Williams at the 2004 Wimbledon Championships final, her grunt became a signature part of her on court presence. Sharapova, perhaps known as much for her tall slim figure and long blonde hair as she is for her grunting, athleticism, and skill, has held some of the most lucrative sponsorship deals in women's sport. A 2006 press release from Nike announcing her first solo campaign for the sportswear giant promised it "dispels [the] 'pretty girl' image" she had fallen into and previously embraced. The commercial features Sharapova arriving at the US Open while all the staff and people surrounding her sing West Side Story's "I Feel Pretty." When she starts play and grunts through a powerful backhand return, everybody is stunned silent. Her grunt expressly announces that she is powerful, while expressly negating the prettiness she was known for. In Nike's words: "The campaign leads with an advertising spot that playfully communicates the message that beneath Maria's beautiful, feminine exterior lives the intense competitive appetite of one of the top athletes in the world."²⁴² Sharapova explained, "there's also an empowering message for female athletes that it's okay to be fierce and competitive on the court and still have a feminine side off court." This "empowering" message echoes the early ways women's tennis established itself as a successful brand by assuring young girls that you can be competitive and still feminine. In the commercial, the grunt signifies the transition from off-court femininity to on-court strength, which is implicitly marked un-feminine if not masculine. Nike's press release lays bare that the ad functions specifically because Sharapova is conventionally attractive.

²⁴² "Maria Sharapova Dispels 'Pretty Girl' Image In First Solo Campaign."

At the Australian Open just a few months after her first Wimbledon win, spectators laughed and mocked Sharapova, culminating in a man yelling “shut up” from the stands. More than clapping and cheers between points and the occasional audible gasp during a particularly delightful rally is a breach of tennis fan decorum. Speaking with press after the match, Sharapova claimed not to hear the fan yelling about her grunting. Sharapova told inquiring reporters: “Well, what do I think? I don’t think, that’s my whole opinion. I don’t think about, you know, what my mouth does when I play out there.”²⁴³ Sharapova claims that she shut out the words shouted from the stands while she was playing, and also asserts that she is not mindful of what she does with her mouth while playing. Taking her at her word, to perform at her best she shuts out or even refuses sensory information, sounds, emanating from the stadium. Furthermore, she forecloses any suggestion that it is deliberate or tactical, by saying she does not think about it; in physiological terms, thus, she frames it as an involuntary behavior. Commenting on the soundscape, Sharapova contends that just as some players must shut out grunting sounds of others, some players who grunt must shut out the heckling from the audience.

The overt way that a ticketholder in the stadium tried to police her is indicative of the shaming pattern she faced early in her success that is more directed by fans and media policing the auditory aspect of her appearance than opponents speaking to a practical aspect of playing against her. At that particular match in Melbourne, only one masculine-sounding person can be heard yelling the words “shut up,” but his words are immediately followed by cheers and raucous laughter from others that appear to be agreeing with him. People in the stadium that day effectively demanded that Sharapova shift her focus from the competitive

²⁴³ Sharapova, Australian Open Press Conference.

play to being more pleasing to the ticketholders. Although the umpire intervened on her behalf, asking the audience to be quiet during play, the public shaming was broadcast live and available for mass dissemination whether or not Sharapova claims to have heard it. The multitude of authorities that play a role in the disciplining of female athletes is demonstrative of a general cultural attitude that women's bodies are a communal good to be disciplined.

Regardless of how many titles she has, how many tickets her name on the scoreboard can sell, an ordinary person can come to her place of work and publicly shame her for not properly embodying femininity. In Foucault's Panopticon, the motivations and authority of the person who enacts discipline are irrelevant to the mechanism and the outcome: "whatever use one may wish to put [the Panopticon] to, produces homogenous effects of power."²⁴⁴ The motivation of the disciplinarian can vary widely. In Seles's case, there were clear indications from representatives of the sport's governing bodies asking her to discipline herself. In Sharapova case, it was the informal power of the audience demanded silence. When mocking a grunting athlete in the middle of play, the audience member's intent, whether they are motivated by genuine disgust of the sound or crave viral social media fame, does not matter. The individualization of the players on court sharply contrasts the anonymization of audience members in a mass of people. From this position, the spectator's behavior has the effect of reminding an accomplished woman of the limits of her power. She will always be beholden to formal authority, such as from of the sport's governing bodies, and to informal authority, which includes the whims of fan tastes that can impact scheduling, TV ratings, and the value of her brand.

²⁴⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

Conclusion: Hearing Women

In the tennis stadium, spectators take on the disciplinarian role of the Panopticon. In that setting, as they experience themselves through the action on court, they are empowered and engaged through a carefully constructed space that grants them anonymity and isolates women for their explicit consumption. In this setting, audiences can form a mob that places specific aesthetic demands on the product they consume. For example, I have discussed how when Sharapova, Sabalenka, or Seles do not meet their audience criteria, they are met with a public shaming intended to weaken her by disrupting the somaesthetic harmony and strength she has trained into her neural pathways. Her refusal to discipline her body for aesthetics while insisting on maximum somatic strength is a rebellion against the power hierarchies of gender and stadium architecture.

In a singles tennis match, each of two players commands over a 36 by 27-foot space. Hard courts are painted in colors that maximize visibility. On the lawns of Wimbledon, players must wear white to contrast with the grass. Players are separated by a net that has a six to eight-foot-high chair next to it for the umpire. The umpire works with up to nine line judges who surround court. Stadium courts are surrounded with microphones and cameras, to say nothing of the tens of thousands of seats all oriented perfectly toward the court. For a woman to act without inhibitions in this space, to mark the soundscape with loud grunts, is rebellious. The refusal to discipline herself and compromise her chances at competitive success is fundamentally at odds with the femininity that allowed women's tennis to reach that stage in the first place.

How femininity is policed through grunting was not the only scandal about bodily discipline in Maria Sharapova's 19-year career as a professional tennis player. Grunting

played out purely in the tennis world, in such a way that is expressive of how quotidian behaviors of women are constantly policed but without having direct impact. By contrast, the next chapter binds Sharapova's experience to perhaps the single worst ecological disaster in the Anthropocene. In 2016, she announced that she failed a doping control test at the Australian Open that year. She had taken Mildronate, a popular Eastern European over the counter medication intended to regulate some metabolic functions. In the ensuing legal hearings and press releases, she connected her ailments to in utero radiation exposure to from Chernobyl's Nuclear Power plant. In the region surrounding her mother's Belarusian hometown, Gomel, 40 miles from the reactor explosion and where she found out she was pregnant with Maria, countless people continue to seek medical attention for undiagnosed and unrecognized harms of low-dose radiation. How Sharapova and the women who remained in the region cope with the fallout and discipline their bodies after the Atomic Age, when neoliberalism took hold of the area, frames the opposite outer margins of discursive power.

Chapter 4

Global Logics of Power After the Atomic Age:

Maria Sharapova and Chernobyl's Biological Citizens

“If you had to pick one event that made me a player, it’d be Chernobyl.”

—Maria Sharapova²⁴⁵

The Biological Citizens of Chernobyl

Like background radiation penetrating, disrupting, and reconfiguring the elemental structure of anything in its path, the 1986 explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant’s (NPP) Reactor 4 quietly set the stage for the biggest doping scandal in tennis history. On March 15, 2016, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) published a brief press release. With it, the organization declared it remained “grateful to Maria Sharapova for her support of our work, especially around the Chernobyl nuclear disaster recovery,” but due to a recent announcement that the Russian tennis player had made, they “suspended her role as a Goodwill Ambassador and any planned activities while the investigation continues.”²⁴⁶ The UNDP did not have to say what that announcement was—the superstar athlete’s doping suspension was all over global news at the time. In the days and months following Sharapova’s public announcement that she continued taking a drug called meldonium, also known by the brand name Mildronate, after the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) had banned it in 2016, structures of global power revealed themselves in new ways. The most influential people, corporations, and governments weighed in on the

²⁴⁵ Sharapova, *Unstoppable*, 15.

²⁴⁶ “Statement Concerning Maria Sharapova.”

scandal as the most disenfranchised remained far from public concern, even as their experience heavily weighed on it.

This chapter tells the story of Maria Sharapova, a hard-working woman from an abject background who earned fame and fortune, and the stories of those who stayed behind and continue to suffer in abjection. Taken together, this chapter analyzes logics of global power after the Atomic Age. My focus is on the five years preceding the Soviet Union's 1991 dissolution and the time since. In the wake of the Chernobyl disaster, capitalism and nuclear fallout co-ravaged an already historically destitute region. Looking at the far ends of the bell curve, I develop a framework of super- and subalterns that serve as bookends of global power structures.²⁴⁷

The conceptual project of this chapter, analyzing the normal functioning of power by turning to the extremes, is modeled after disability studies approaches to the able body. Disability theorist Lennard J. Davis argues that disability was invented in the 19th Century when "normal" entered the lexicon.²⁴⁸ Industrialization and mass production led to the development of statistics, a formal and logical way to measure and organize human bodies and their functioning. Workers, machines, and products were normed along a bell curve. Previously in Western culture, he argues, there was a striving toward unattainable, divine ideals that humans universally failed to reach. All society shared being less than the Gods and one woman could not be shamed or othered for failing to approximate Helen of Troy.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ Although there is a small amount of scholarship that uses the super- and subaltern as opposites outside of a formal logic context, there has been little development of it as an analytic. Brown, "Beyond Resistance." Brzyski, "The Paradox of the Ethnographic Superaltern: Ethnonationalism and Tourism in the Polish Tatra Mountains at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century."

²⁴⁸ Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," 3.

²⁴⁹ Davis, 4.

The norm, however, is explicitly designed to be achievable and common: “The average then becomes paradoxically a kind of ideal.”²⁵⁰ In this social reasoning, the majority of people are normal and therefore the margins are abnormal, other, and deviant. This chapter analyzed how power to affect, impact, and manipulate discourse resides in different bodily extremes after the Chernobyl disaster. The extremes, the super- and subaltern I theorize in this space, fight for the majority’s compassion and attention to receive access to medical benefits.

I describe the population this chapter analyzes as Chernobyl’s biological citizens. Social anthropologist Jessica Mulligan describes the meaning of “biological citizenship as “forms of belonging, rights claims, and demands for access to resources and care that are made on a biological basis such as an injury, shared genetic status, or disease state.” She adds that under globalization, “these biologically based rights claims are not made exclusively on states, but also on transnational actors like nongovernmental organizations, international governmental bodies, and pharmaceutical companies.”²⁵¹ Medical anthropologist Adriana Petryna, who coined the term for her ethnography about the Chernobyl region explained it as the “massive demand for, but selective access to, a form of social welfare based on medical, scientific, and legal criteria that both acknowledge biological injury and compensate for it.”²⁵² The people who remained in the Chernobyl region fight for the dignity of being recognized as victims of the disaster as a way to access

²⁵⁰ Davis, 5.

²⁵¹ Mulligan, “Biological Citizenship.”

²⁵² Heinemann, “Biological Citizenship.”

basic care and resources they need to survive.²⁵³ They still share biological markers with people whose families left after exposure, which includes Maria Sharapova. The tennis player evoked the nuclear accident and the impact on her body three decades later, when she tried to explain why she took a banned Latvian metabolic modulator on match day at the Australian Open.

The region impacted by the disaster includes a diverse population shaped by regime changes and wars. Currently split between Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia, various East Slav ethnic groups lived in the region that was under Soviet occupation leading up to the disaster. The Polesian swamps in the Belarusian part are home to the indigenous Poleshuk people who were pulled into many political struggles long before the reactor exploded. Consider the life story of one Poleshuk centenarian who refused to leave her ancestral land, interviewed by historian Kate Brown. Halia lives outside a small village tucked between swamps near the reactor. She grew up playing in the trenches the tsarists dug in World War I. During the Russian Civil War between the Whites and Bolshevik armies, from 1917 to 1922, soldiers quartered in her town and violently requisitioned whatever they pleased from her community. 1932-1933, she lived through the Soviet Famine. A decade later, she saw Nazis burn her village to the ground. Shortly after that, she witnessed Soviets soldiers claim the land she lived on as their territory. Throughout the many changes, she mostly subsisted off her family's modest farm and by foraging in the local forest and swamps. Although her small town, Nedanchychi, was not evacuated after the explosion, her whole lifestyle was changed as a result. Soviet engineers rerouted water ways, draining the swamps surrounding

²⁵³ In many contexts, survivor language is preferred over referring to people as victims. I specifically use the term victim here because this chapter is about how they, from their own perspective, were and continuously are victimized. Furthermore, some of the individual stories I recount are from older interviews

her community. To reduce contamination by keeping animals indoors and importing feed from uncontaminated regions, new regulations rapidly forced industrial farming on the indigenous population. Most people self-evacuated from the region as soon as they had funds and opportunities, leaving just a handful of people, mostly older, living on their native land despite the potential health risks.²⁵⁴

Accurately assessing the full scale of the Chernobyl disaster is impossible, considering the pervasive obfuscation that followed the event. According to the World Health Organization “fewer than 50” people died because of the Chernobyl accident.²⁵⁵ The UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) cites a lower number: 28 emergency workers died of acute radiation poisoning and cardiac arrest and the explosion itself killed two workers on site.²⁵⁶ Brown attempted to assess the scale with archival research. According to her findings, in the immediate aftermath, 15,000 people were treated for radiation exposure in Moscow, which is where the worst cases went to specialists, and another 40,000 were treated in Ukraine and Belarus. Today, Ukraine continues to pay benefits to 35,000 people whose spouses died as a result of the disaster and Brown alleges estimates go as high as 150,000 victims in Ukraine.²⁵⁷

Various international scientists have studied the region, but due to little support and sometimes threats from local agencies, the results all carry an asterisk that the best

and archives, and it is likely that many of the people whose stories I recount did not survive the disaster, even if they lived for another ten or fifteen years after it.

²⁵⁴ Brown, *Manual for Survival*, 120–24.

²⁵⁵ “WHO | Chernobyl.”

²⁵⁶ “Frequently Asked Chernobyl Questions.”

²⁵⁷ Dizikes, “Chernobyl.”

methodologies could not always be used. Part of the trouble with attributing illness to the single event of the explosion is that Soviet weapons tests had already elevated background radiation in the region.²⁵⁸ Despite all the issues with data collection, one study concluded: “The increase [in cancer deaths in Belarus] is statistically significant for all regions, but significantly greater in the most chronically radiation-contaminated region: the Gomel oblast.”²⁵⁹ The Gomel oblast, or district, is home to Maria Sharapova’s family. Physician Yury Bandazhevsky set up an institute there to study the long-term effects of radiation exposure, but was arrested in 1999 on what Amnesty International considered bogus charges when they listed him as a prisoner of conscious. He has lived in exile since his 2005 release and continues to speak with press warning about lasting health impacts, however, unable to return, he lacks the resources to study the impact scientifically so long as local authorities continue to hinder research that might inflate the death count.²⁶⁰ In the absence of reliable data, it is impossible to confidently state the impact radiation had on people living nearby. This uncertainty over the legitimacy of medical claims also weighed on Sharapova as she tried to explain her use of meldonium to a curious public, sponsors, and authorities.

Maria Sharapova’s parents’ home was just outside the zone of alienation—the area within a 30km (18.6 mile) radius of the NPP that was evacuated and placed under military control—but the arbitrary line did not account for how the radioactive material would move through the atmosphere. The Soviet approach to marking the zone of alienation, also referred to as the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, did not account of the northerly winds that

²⁵⁸ Brown, *Manual for Survival*, 133.

²⁵⁹ Okeanov, Sosnovskaya, and Priatkina, “A National Cancer Registry to Assess Trends after the Chernobyl Accident,” 645.

²⁶⁰ Hjelmgaard, “Exiled Scientist.”

dumped the bulk of hazardous material on Southern Belarus. Soviet weather engineers launched top secret Operation Cyclone, in which pilots sprayed silver iodide into the contaminated clouds over Belarus to induce rain that would spare Russia and Ukraine from the worst effects of the ecological disaster.²⁶¹ Belarus's top physicist, Vasily Nesterenko, estimated that Belarusians who stayed home for ten days after the explosion, like Sharapova's parents, were exposed to enough fallout to cause signs of radiation sickness.²⁶² To stave off a full-fledged panic, Soviet authorities confiscated radiation counting devices from Belarusian research institutes within days of the explosion.²⁶³

Yelena Sharapova, Maria's mother, described a smoke coming over the town as rumors started that a loud bang at night came from a fire at the nearby power plant. Officials remained silent, not even telling residents to close their windows to minimize exposure to the "smoke" that was in fact radioactive Cesium-137.²⁶⁴ In her memoir, Sharapova romantically describes the part of Gomel where her parents lived and its "muddy streets and forest paths." This bucolic lifestyle was particularly vulnerable to long-term contamination because, while paved roads could be rinsed clean and radioactive isotopes would settle on the sides, dirt roads would become dusty and the radioactive material would be routinely kicked up and settle on clothing, skin, and food.²⁶⁵ Unaware of the risks, Sharapova explains: "my mother was about to be pregnant with me when the reactor blew, drinking the

²⁶¹ Brown, *Manual for Survival*, 42.

²⁶² Brown, 44.

²⁶³ Brown, 45.

²⁶⁴ Sharapova, *Unstoppable*, 14.

²⁶⁵ Brown, *Manual for Survival*, 108–11.

water and eating vegetables, and continued to drink the water and eat the vegetables after she had gotten pregnant.”²⁶⁶

Maria Sharapova was fortunate that her family found the opportunity to evacuate when her mother was several months pregnant, limiting her in utero exposure. Her maternal grandmother lived in Siberia and happened to meet a clean-up work from the power plant. He warned her that the fallout was “an invisible death” killing all organisms with “off the scale” levels of radiation. At the man’s urging, Sharapova’s father and mother were able to move to Nyagan, Siberia, where Maria was born approximately one year after the disaster. In her memoir, Sharapova’s references to any long-term impact of the disaster on her own biology are a punchline. Referencing mushrooms that grew the size of dinner plates after exposure, she muses, “My mother and father are not small, but are not big either. I am six foot two, not counting heels.”²⁶⁷ Whether or not the prenatal exposure altered her DNA or fetal development enough to make her taller, it did mark her as a biological citizen of the Chernobyl disaster. In some ways she makes light of the effects, joking about it giving her an advantage, but the specific health issues she outlines elsewhere in the memoir cast a shadow on the jokes when read against medical literature about the possible ailments caused by exposure.

The effects of radiation in different forms and dosages are mysterious because of the lack of research, range in possible symptoms, and the difficulty in pinpointing causality. As researchers Kulakov et al. explain, “It is difficult to interpret the exact significance of the accumulated data because there is no definite information concerning the effects of minor

²⁶⁶ Sharapova, *Unstoppable*, 14.

²⁶⁷ Sharapova, 14.

doses of radiation on humans, and there is uncertainty about significance of the signs, the time of their appearance and duration, their correlation with individual dose levels, and the exact levels of pollution.”²⁶⁸ The International Commission on Radiological Protection had set levels it considers safe for in utero exposure, but these were based on research in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an entirely different type of nuclear event defined by a much stronger initial burst of radiation that dissipated more rapidly.²⁶⁹ Not to mention, the Geiger counters where Sharapova’s family lived had been confiscated so it is impossible to determine her dose.

Limited research into prenatal exposure to radiation shows a broad range of possible effects. In 1993, researchers found, “the health of the mothers, fetuses and children differed significantly from the physiological norm. There was a specific complex of adaptational and pathological abnormalities of various organs and systems.”²⁷⁰ Schmitz-Feuerhake et al. compared central registries of congenital malformations (CM) in Belarus before and after the disaster to ascertain the impact of in utero exposure and found an increase of 43%-81% in CM in births for the seven years after the disaster.²⁷¹ More commonly, people associate the health impact of radioactive exposure to cancer, specifically thyroid cancer, but the increase in a wide range of diseases in the Chernobyl region after the disaster points to a wide range of health impacts that some experts attribute to exposure.

²⁶⁸ Kulakov et al., “Female Reproductive Function in Areas Affected by Radiation after the Chernobyl Power Station Accident,” 123.

²⁶⁹ Busby et al., “The Evidence of Radiation Effects in Embryos and Fetuses Exposed to Chernobyl Fallout and the Question of Dose Response.”

²⁷⁰ Kulakov et al., “Female Reproductive Function in Areas Affected by Radiation after the Chernobyl Power Station Accident,” 123.

²⁷¹ Schmitz-Feuerhake, Busby, and Pflugbeil, “Genetic Radiation Risks.”

There are two particular sets of findings that are critical to understanding Sharapova's biological citizenship as it relates to her doping case and binds the analyses of power later in this chapter. First, one study found "a significant increase of Type 1 diabetes was also reported in infants in the Byelorussian Gomel region in the period between 1986 and 1999."²⁷² Second, in the Chechersky district near Gomel, health issues in children after in utero exposure were recorded chiefly as "diseases of respiratory organs, blood circulation, etc."²⁷³ These are the exact symptoms Sharapova routinely described as her reason for taking Mildronate, the brand name for drug that she was eventually banned for. In her memoir, she explains: "It's used to treat many ailments, including coronary artery disease. Mildronate had been recommended to me by a family doctor back in 2006. I'd been run down at the time, getting sick very often, and had registered several abnormal EKGs. There was also a family history of diabetes."²⁷⁴ Although she does not suggest a causal link between her symptoms and in utero exposure in her memoir, the findings from researchers in Gomel bind her adult woes to the experiences of her fellow biological citizens.

Having become famous for exceptional athleticism, Sharapova publicly excusing her doping by citing Chernobyl would have risked looking absurd to a global audience. Because the science and research into low dose exposure were hindered by local and international authorities, there is no definitive standard she could point to and say what dosage she received and how that would impact her health. Like other biological citizens of Chernobyl,

²⁷² Zalutskaya et al., "Did the Chernobyl Incident Cause an Increase in Type 1 Diabetes Mellitus Incidence in Children and Adolescents?"

²⁷³ Busby et al., "The Evidence of Radiation Effects in Embryos and Fetuses Exposed to Chernobyl Fallout and the Question of Dose Response."

²⁷⁴ Sharapova, *Unstoppable*, 5.

she is caught in a political landscape that does not want to recognize long-term health impacts of the accident and tries to deny her benefits because of it.

When athletes require medication for recognized health conditions, they can file to receive a therapeutic use exemption (TUE). The TUE application is sent by medical staff to the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), which assesses the legitimacy of the claim and determines if a player may use a substance that is otherwise banned. The rules allow transgender athletes to seek special permission to take hormones that a cis-gender athletes may not. An athlete diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder may be permitted to take amphetamines like Adderall. There are four criteria that must all be met for exemption to be granted: (1) The athlete would have significant health problems if they did not take the substance; (2) the substance would not lead to “significant enhancement of performance;” (3) there is no reasonable alternative; and finally (4) the requirement to use is “not due to the prior use of the substance without a TUE which was prohibited at the time of use.”²⁷⁵ Under these guidelines, Sharapova might have been eligible to apply for a TUE, but communication about the ban was insufficient, and she claims her team did not know the substance was added to the banned list.

The ban on meldonium, enacted to begin 2016, was specifically designed to target Eastern European athletes, without significant clinical evidence that the substance was performance enhancing. WADA began monitoring use of the substance in 2014, when they received a tip that many Eastern European athletes were using it, which in itself was deemed suspicious. The organization began to check for it in routine urine tests to assess how

²⁷⁵ “Therapeutic Use Exemption.”

common use was, and found 2.2% of global samples contained meldonium.²⁷⁶ Prior to the ban, Sharapova was tested for the substance on eight occasions, and tested positive five times;²⁷⁷ she was not notified of this monitoring. When WADA moved the substance from the monitored list to banned, they did so without much fanfare and left responsibility of communication with individual leagues and federations. Many Eastern European athletes in various sports were sent specific and clear notifications by their leagues; but tennis was less communicative. Sharapova received a standard email instructing her to click a link with a new list. In a moment of sloppiness from her and her team, she claims, the email was ignored and she continued to take the same medication she had been taking for a decade without confirming its legality for the tenth year.

An April 2016 press release addressed to WADA's "Stakeholders," presumably athletes and athletic leagues, explained that 172 samples from various sports had tested positive for the substance: "there has been a call by stakeholders for further clarification and guidance [...] Meldonium is a particular substance, which has created an unprecedented situation and therefore warranted additional guidance for the anti-doping community."²⁷⁸ WADA conceded that there is "limited data available on excretion studies relating to Meldonium" and suggested sports jurisdictions consider a stay on banning athletes until more research is done. Latvian manufacturer Grindeks questioned the validity of the ban on scientific ground, saying that the drug "cannot improve athletic performance but it can stop

²⁷⁶ Clarey, "Wave of Positive Tests for Meldonium Adds to Doping Crisis."

²⁷⁷ "Maria Sharapova's Antidoping Rule Violation: Statement of Facts," 16.

²⁷⁸ "WADA Statement on Meldonium Notice Issued to Stakeholders."

tissue damage in the case of ischemia,' which is the lack of blood flow to the heart.”²⁷⁹ Sharapova, having already admitted the fact that she took meldonium, could hereby argue that she did not break any ethical commitments to the purity of competition and only broke a technical rule.

In legal filings shared on her website, Sharapova admits to taking a banned substance, but makes the case that (1) she was not given sufficient notice that the medication was added to the banned list and (2) her use was performance enabling, rather than enhancing. For the distinction to be performance enabling, it implies an underlying health issue that her baseline health was below normal levels, and she could have sought a therapeutic use exemption if she had known about the ban. Although the argument would still show she violated rules, it would make it appear as a technical rule violation, rather than cheating or an attempt to gain an unfair advantage over other players. For that case, she would have to convince the sport's authorities, but much more the public, that she truly had legitimate, medical need to continue taking this particular medication.

In response to Sharapova's positive test, the International Tennis Federation (ITF) appointed a tribunal to investigate the case and issue a ruling. Intentional doping carries a minimum four-year ban. Unintentional doping, such as through a contaminated supplement or not checking medication against WADA's list, can incur up to a two-year sentence if “significant fault or negligence” can be attributed to the player. The ITF Tribunal issued a ruling that Sharapova was to serve a two-year ban from the sport. Conceding her case was unintentional, the ruling claimed she still met the standard for fault. She failed, they argued, at her responsibility to pay attention to amended policies and chose not to disclose

²⁷⁹ Reevell, “Meldonium Ban Hits Russian Athletes Hard.”

meldonium use on WTA medical forms during its legal period. She also failed to tell most of her own support staff. The final words of the ruling read: “She is the sole author of her own misfortune.”²⁸⁰

Sharapova appealed the ITF Tribunal’s decision at the International Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Lausanne, Switzerland. CAS serves as an independent court and appoints a neutral panel, unlike the ITF Tribunal that was appointed by the organization to rule on its own policies and effectiveness of communication. On appeal, CAS reduced her ban to 15-months. The decision emphasizes that “the Player did not endeavor to mask or hide her use of Mildronate.”²⁸¹ The Panel added that “under no circumstances, therefore, can the Player be considered to be an ‘intentional doper.’”²⁸²

Buried in the public legal documents, there are health and bureaucratic indicators that establish her biological citizenship. The medication was recommended by a doctor who was a leader in “the area of medicine concerned with the biological role of trace elements on health and disease.”²⁸³ It adds her father was mindful to consult with a Russian doctor, even after moving to the United States, because he worried the disaster may be a factor in her health. The report cites her diagnosis as vegetative-vascular dystonia (VvD). The report explains, “this is a condition that is not extensively described in Western medical literature but that has been characterized extensively in Russian medical literature. In very basic terms, it is a condition which results in insufficient supply of oxygen to the tissues and

²⁸⁰ “The International Tennis Federation v. Maria Sharapova Decision”; Clarey, “Maria Sharapova Bungled Her Doping Case, but Her Appeal Has a Chance.”

²⁸¹ Court of Arbitration for Sport, “CAS 2016/A/4643 Maria Sharapova v. International Tennis Federation Arbitral Award Delivered by the Court of Arbitration for Sport.”

²⁸² Court of Arbitration for Sport.

²⁸³ “Maria Sharapova’s Antidoping Rule Violation: Statement of Facts,” 10.

organs.”²⁸⁴ The report also notes she had high glucose levels and “irregularities in cardiovascular activity and with Maria’s cardiorespiratory system.”²⁸⁵ This is a more complex and specific description of the symptoms she described in her memoir. In the medical specificity, more explicit linkages to Chernobyl are made visible.

While all the symptoms Sharapova described have been linked to in utero radiation exposure, the VvD diagnosis in particular binds her to abject citizens remaining in the Chernobyl region. Following the disaster, marking VvD in a medical file meant a patient was not sick enough to receive government support granted to victims of the disaster but was still too sick to work normally. Conducting ethnographic research on the long-term health effects of radiation exposure in Ukraine, Adriana Petryna, noted earlier for coining the term biological citizen, conducted extensive interviews with people who share Sharapova’s diagnosis. VvD is commonly compared to panic disorders and chronic fatigue syndrome in the West but is causally tied to radiation or other environmental factors. Soviet health officials first classified it in the 1960s to describe symptoms such as “heart palpitations, sweating and tremors, nausea,” and others that resemble acute radiation poisoning (ARS).²⁸⁶

VvD, Petryna notes, was widely diagnosed in Ukraine after 1986, when the Soviet Health Ministry ordered Ukrainian health minister Anatolii Romanenko to use the diagnosis to “filter out the majority of radiation-related medical claims.”²⁸⁷ For hospitals in the affected regions to admit tens of thousands of patients into hospitals for ARS would have

²⁸⁴ “Maria Sharapova’s Antidoping Rule Violation: Statement of Facts,” 11.

²⁸⁵ “Maria Sharapova’s Antidoping Rule Violation: Statement of Facts,” 12.

²⁸⁶ Petryna, *Life Exposed*, 43.

undermined Soviet messaging that the incident at Chernobyl was a localized event and that evacuations from the zone of alienation were sufficient measures to ensure public safety. The ARS diagnosis was largely reserved for the heroes of the disaster, the 50 or so firefighters who sacrificed their lives to save others. The firefighters were the models of good Soviet citizenship, valuing the collective over all else and accepting acute radiation as a necessary part of their role in society. The common people who streamed into hospitals over months and years that followed, however, were collateral damage of massive Soviet failures of civil engineering, construction, and corruption. These people were a thorn in the eye of the USSR on the brink of collapse. Recognizing that ordinary folks like Sharapova and her family might have been medically impacted by the disaster would show weakness and the massive scale of the disaster, blaming an ambiguous nervous disorder like VvD was a way for the USSR to save face. Their suffering was expressly denied even while it was treated.

When the Ukrainian Ministry of Health took charge of medical aspects related to the Chernobyl disaster after the USSR disbanded in 1991, they began to scrutinize the legitimacy of VvD diagnoses. Between 1987 and 1989, there was a twelvefold increase in the diagnosis.²⁸⁸ In the years following the disaster and collapse of the Soviet Union, Petryna explains, “By 1990, VvD was understood as a ‘unmasking’ itself in particular somatic forms. In short, a Soviet pattern of medical underdiagnosis was being replaced by an emerging ‘domestic neurology’ of Chernobyl’s ill effects.”²⁸⁹ Whereas Soviet officials

²⁸⁷ Petryna, 43.

²⁸⁸ Petryna, 127.

²⁸⁹ Petryna, 127.

had encouraged VvD as a broad diagnosis, as time went on, people who had it diverged with different and more specific symptoms that were reclassified for such things as acute radiation syndrome long after the initial exposure. VvD was given specific diagnostic criteria that one expert Petryna interviewed explained had now had a clearly defined pathology, “visible morphological changes in organs proven by echocardiograms, ultrasounds, and computerized tomographic scans.”²⁹⁰ It is within this context that Sharapova’s use of Mildronate and subsequent trials and hearings must be viewed.

Putting together the various facts of the case, Sharapova’s biographical details, and the experiences and research out of Gomel, I propose as possibility that in utero exposure to radiation from Chernobyl impacted her long-term health. The statement of facts in Sharapova’s hearing before CAS shows the extensive testing she received before being recommended Mildroante. The report says that Russian physician Dr. Skalny diagnosed her at the Scientific Research Institute of General Pathology and Pathophysiology at the Russian Academy of Sciences, “using a spiroarteriocardiorhythmograph. The study revealed irregularities in cardiovascular activity and with Maria’s cardiorespiratory system.”²⁹¹ Without citing Chernobyl or referring back specifically to the VvD diagnosis mentioned elsewhere in the report, expert witnesses at her CAS hearing agreed that taking Mildronate, a cardio protector, made sense given her condition. The exposure could have reduced her baseline significantly enough that she required performance enabling drugs. The VvD diagnosis specifically marks her as a biological citizen, trying years later to gain recognition for her disparate health outcomes, in the face of a global bureaucracy that does not take her

²⁹⁰ Petryna, 128.

²⁹¹ “Maria Sharapova’s Antidoping Rule Violation: Statement of Facts,” 12.

health concerns seriously. Since the disaster in 1986, ordinary people from the Chernobyl region experienced having authorities systematically deny the seriousness of their medical condition. In 2016, Sharapova, an extraordinary individual, was experiencing this with in the global public's eye.

Positioning Maria Sharapova and her doping scandal next to the experience of the Chernobyl NPP disaster's other uncounted and unrecognized victims, I argue that she and the others represent opposite margins of a global power within the same biological citizenry. Whereas Sharapova's case showed her ability to influence discourse, driving some of the world's most powerful institutions to comment on what happened after she peed into a cup, the people who remained in Gomel struggle to even get seen by a doctor who will order a urine sample. Their health is written off as inconsequential to many of the same institutions, like the Kremlin and United Nations, that commented on Sharapova within days of her news breaking. This split in power to influence people, institutions, and discourses, represented by extremes within the cohort of Chernobyl's biological citizens serves as one place to analyze global logics of power after the Atomic Age.

Maria Sharapova: Superaltern

Having established that Maria Sharapova is a biological citizen of Chernobyl and having shown some of the systematic ways Soviet and post-Soviet authorities have oppressed this population, I turn to subaltern studies to analyze those histories. The field arose out of postcolonialism to theorize in part how transnational powers and regimes of knowledge function in oppression, specifically the English Empire in India. Dissatisfied with how English Marxists applied their theories to South Asia, Ranajit Guha turned attention to "the problem of how to think about the history of power in an age when capital

and the governing institutions of modernity increasingly develop a global reach.”²⁹²

Subaltern Studies, as a field, is premised on the belief that European theories of history and capital cannot adequately explain subaltern experience in (post-)colonial spaces. The term was derived from usage that began around 1605, when it came to refer to “a person of inferior rank or status, a subordinate.” Now it is used “chiefly in critical and cultural theory, esp. post-colonial theory: a member of a marginalized or oppressed group; a person who is not part of the hegemony.”²⁹³

To analyze the discursive power dynamics of Chernobyl’s biological citizens, I turn to how the term “subaltern” was originally applied in logic and consider it against its opposite, the superaltern. In Aristotelian logic, there is a “square of opposition” that describes the relation between categorical propositions.²⁹⁴ There are four such propositions described with symbols: (A) the universal affirmative that *every S is P*; (E) the universal negative that *no S is P*; (I) the particular affirmative whereby *some S is P*; and finally, (O) the particular negative that *some S is not P*.²⁹⁵ In the square, A is superaltern to I and E is superaltern to O. That means, I is subaltern to A and O is subaltern to E. The universal propositions have a superaltern relation to the particular propositions. For example, with the (A) universal affirmative that all Chernobyl residents are healthy, its subaltern (I) particular affirmative that some Chernobyl residents are healthy is also true and the superaltern claim makes its subaltern not worth mentioning. The superaltern allows for immediate inference and truth of its subaltern. The subaltern proposition that some Chernobyl residents are

²⁹² Chakrabarty, “A Small History of Subaltern Studies,” 467.

²⁹³ “Subaltern, n. and Adj.” “Subaltern.”

²⁹⁴ See Appendix VII for an illustration of the square of opposition and additional explanation.

healthy, however, does not imply a universal truth about all Chernobyl residents. The other side of the square of opposition holds the negative propositions. There is the (E) universal negative that no Chernobyl residents are healthy and (O) the particular negative that some Chernobyl residents are healthy. Again, the superaltern defines a complete truth, whereas the subaltern proposition is limited and allows for doubt. I stray slightly from some philosophical interpretations and complications of the square. Given the complexity of actors and the fact that not all claims made here can be simply mapped onto four propositions, my use and interest are mostly limited to the dynamic between the sub- and superalterns.

I posit that Maria Sharapova discursively occupies a superaltern position that is marked by being in the highest of the high echelons of hegemonic global power formations. She was able to use this position to reconfigure the entire premise of what it means to test positive for a banned substance. She is in the position of manufacturing and defining truth, a universal proposition in discourse. I pick up the problem Guha identified by studying the power of one of the individuals in which it is most visibly concentrated and contrasting it to those in Chernobyl fighting for recognition who remain subaltern to her. Her doping scandal brought to the surface the power that was already circulating through her as a node in a network of global power formations. The superaltern, in the global context in which I use it, can only exist in the recent era of massively accessible communications and is defined in part by gaining power outside of nationalist logics. The way I use superaltern, I refer to a person of superior rank or status, a member of an elite group whose speech and behavior

²⁹⁵ “Subaltern.” Parsons, “The Traditional Square of Opposition.”

represents and impacts any entities they are affiliated with. As an adjective, superaltern can describe the discursive power or socio-cultural position from which such a person acts.

In the way that subalterns are generally multiply oppressed through numerous institutions and intersectional positionalities, the superaltern is multiply empowered beyond any one industry or sphere of influence. For instance, their power could be built through finance, politics, or media. The globalized nature of late capitalism that disenfranchises subalterns is precisely what empowers superalterns; not only are they in a position to benefit from it as elites and dominant groups, they are in a position to shape and direct it.

In different theoretical and scholarly frameworks, the lowest of the low have been referred to variously as abject, wretched, damned, or proletarian; the higher ranks of society have been called such things as elite or bourgeois. I reserve superaltern to refer to only the highest of the high. The total wealth of the world's 62 richest people increased from \$1.2 trillion to \$1.76 trillion between 2010 and 2015, in the same period the poorest half of the population lost over a trillion dollars, a 38% drop over five years.²⁹⁶ The rapid polarization in wealth distribution and the distillation of wealth that go with it demand a new analytic for this unprecedented condition. Not simply the one percent, the superaltern is who the one percent are accountable and responsive to. While coming out of Marxist and Gramscian thought, the term is not limited to European conceptions of power circulating through capital and class; it takes into account the impermanence of wealth and fame, and the instability of class associations over national borders. While wealth is certainly one metric to understand power relations, it is only one aspect of the superaltern.

²⁹⁶ Slater, "62 People Own the Same as Half the World, Reveals Oxfam Davos Report."

To better understand and resist global power and the oppressions that result from it, one has to better understand superalterns and how they impact, move, and manipulate discourses to their favor. Maria Sharapova's power, which extends far beyond the tennis court, positions her as a subject of discourse, rather than an object. She is the universal affirmative to which others are subalternated. Distinguishing her from the formation of "elite" or "influencer," she is in a position to influence the elites. I specifically build my case on the example of an ostensibly apolitical sports celebrity to demonstrate how cultural power can reach into and influence global political and corporate spheres.

As an analytic category, super- and subaltern serve as bookends to the global-popular. With subalterns at the lowest end on the scale of global discursive power and superalterns at the highest, the totality of power resides between the two. The global-popular gives power to the superalterns, often at the expense of subalterns. In the Gramscian sense of hegemonic power, where power is produced and circulated through consent, the global-popular's consent can empower the global superalterns to oppress subalterns with impunity. When the masses agree with the world view put forth by the dominant groups, it takes on the appearance of being their own perspective. That said, the global-popular can turn on the elites and take that power and consent away, be it by rioting through the streets or organizing a successful boycott. A superaltern's power becomes visible when they act on their own behalf in a way that requires either a significant shift in public opinion or known and often violent oppression of the subaltern without repercussion.

I now turn back to Maria Sharapova to look more closely at the superaltern as an analytic category. Because hegemony is not a static, stable structure, but rather a dynamic system, it is continually renewed and negotiated. I use Sharapova and her doping scandal to exemplify how these negotiations for consent of the masses take place. There is no clear or

comprehensive metric for what constitutes a superaltern position, but I will show how her doping scandal revealed and even created her power to impact discourses outside tennis and forced major global entities respond to her, demonstrating her power over the ordinary elite and demonstrating by contrast the abjection of the millions who remained in Chernobyl. The ways that power is formed and wielded needs to be understood to resist it effectively, such as when advocating for better health outcomes of disenfranchised groups.

Maria Sharapova's path to superalternity began after the accident drove her family first to Siberia, where she was born, and soon after they moved to Sochi, where she began to play tennis. Martina Navratilova discovered Sharapova when she was only four years old and convinced the family to relocate to Florida by the time she was seven, so Maria could train at the best tennis academies. Sharapova had her first Nike contract and signed with top sports agency IMG before she was twelve. At 17 she won Wimbledon, experiencing her first brush with fame outside the tennis world when she made front page news as a young player to watch.²⁹⁷ Notable not only for her athletic prowess but also her conventionally attractive, white, hetero-feminine appearance, she began to sign sponsorship deals with brands that have no relation to the sport but who saw her potential to market both to tennis fans and general publics. In 2005 she became the first Russian to hold the number one ranking. The same year, she also became highest paid female athlete in the world, a title she would go on to hold for eleven years, earning an estimated \$285 million dollars in endorsements and another \$35 million in prize money.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁷ Sharapova, *Unstoppable*.

²⁹⁸ Clarey, "Maria Sharapova's Future."

Capturing what made her a valuable brand partner, one Porsche executive I interviewed just one month prior to the positive doping test, said that Sharapova exemplifies “elegance, style, and performance.”²⁹⁹ Japanese electronics brand Canon hired her as their first global spokesmodel, breaking from their previous policy of using individual celebrities for specific markets. In their estimation, Sharapova was popular in such a way that she could influence consumers world-wide. Her endorsements have ranged from the high-end Porsche to the more accessible Pepsi. Her name has been wielded to sell deodorant in Europe and condominiums in India. Her Tag Heuer ads appeared in magazines, boutiques, and airports around the world. In 2007, the United Nations named her a goodwill ambassador for her work supporting education the Chernobyl region.

From childhood, Sharapova and long-time agent Max Eisenbud crafted her public persona to embody focus and professionalism, an image that could easily be undermined by mistake like accidental doping after failing to check new drug lists. The ritual adjustment of her racquet strings between every point and the precise manner in which she brushes her hair behind her ear before every serve became hallmarks of her behavior that bolstered her image of perfectionism and attention to detail. She reliably kept her temper in check on court, not even once smashing a racquet during a match, making her a sought after, feminine and palatable, brand partner. Outside of tournaments she was occasionally spotted at art galleries, fashion shows, and obscure coffee shops. Her Instagram projected an elegant persona with interests in fine arts, architecture, and fashion. It was with this decade strong reputation for grace, integrity, and precision that Maria Sharapova stepped into the ballroom of a downtown Los Angeles hotel to announce that she failed a drug test at the Australian

²⁹⁹Cheever, Maria Sharapova and Friends.

Open. Being caught using performance enhancing drugs not only threatened to undercut her career as an athlete, but could read as an indefensible betrayal of sport itself.

In March of 2016, Sharapova had tweeted: “I will hold a press conference today @12pm” with a link to her website that offered fans a video streaming link and included details for open satellite broadcasts so television networks everywhere could link into the event. When Sharapova walked up to the podium in front of an international press corps that gathered in the interim hours, she announced she had failed a drug test at January’s Australian Open and was provisionally banned from competition. Standing out in a silk black Rick Owens jacket against a beige curtain backdrop, at what must have been a low point of her life, she was fully on brand. She was playful with media and made bare her apparent fall from grace after a decade of calculated public relations when she said, “I know many of you thought I would be retiring today, but if I was ever going to announce my retirement it would probably not be in a downtown Los Angeles hotel with this fairly ugly carpet.”^{300, 301} She positioned herself ahead of a story that would rope in responses from entities as diverse and powerful as Porsche and the United Nations. By June, she had managed to keep a large public on her side so that when a tribunal sentenced her to a two-year suspension, the *New York Times* sports section referred to the ruling as “Dickensian” and her sponsor Nike, which had initially suspended ties with the athlete, reinstated its sponsorship.

³⁰⁰ Thomas, “Maria Sharapova Plays the Long Game.”

³⁰¹ When she announced her retirement in February 2020, she did so with essays published in *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*. In a *New York Times* story to accompany the news, the reporter recalled her previous comments and made a note about the attractive flooring where he interviewed her in New York. He tweeted, “I can confirm that the carpet was suitably chic for a retirement interview” Clarey, “Maria Sharapova Wants to Be Clear: She Is Retiring From Tennis, Not Quitting.”

When a low ranked tennis player tests positive for performance enhancing drugs, it may scandalize their few fans, but swift and severe action from the doping authorities preserves the integrity of tennis and reminds the broader audience of the dominant purity. When one of the most adored and respected players tests positive, two things can happen: (1) it serves to prove that doping authorities are fair and enforce the rules regardless of how it could impact ticket sales (2) it upsets the worldview of a global tennis audience that had sought refuge in its order and would now be forced to confront a slippage in their compartmentalized realities. In Gramsci's conception of hegemonic power, the subordinate group accepts the dominant's world view as its own, preserving the order. Because the dominant group's interests change, there is constant negotiation of those world views. The months that followed Sharapova's admission that she competed with meldonium in her system became a global, public negotiation in the logics of power. At stake was the value of perceived purity in the embodied aspects of athletic competition, which would come at the expense of Sharapova's career and integrity, against the perceived purity in sports administration, which would come at the expense of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) and the International Tennis Federation's (ITF) integrity.

Announcing her failed test, Sharapova put out a proposition to which other actors and stakeholders were asked to respond. Fans began to tweet #IStandWithMaria and #LetMariaPlay, directing their messages not only tennis authorities but also Sharapova's corporate sponsors to express support. Over the next weeks, every major tennis player, male and female, active and retired, was asked to comment on the story. No top, active player spoke out against Sharapova publicly or questioned the reasons she took the drug in the first place. Players universally expressed surprise that a woman known so specifically for her attention to detail could have made such a colossal and entirely preventable misstep. Serena

Williams praised Sharapova for taking responsibility, saying “that takes courage and heart.” Referring to the general climate on the tour, Williams added “most people are happy with the fact she was upfront with what she had done in terms of what she had neglected.”³⁰² The United Nations suspended their ties with her. Vladimir Putin asked the international community not to politicize meldonium use and said Russian sporting authorities were partially responsible for distributing the drug along with vitamins and failed to properly warn athletes of the rule change.³⁰³

Within hours of the press conference, Nike, Porsche and Tag Heuer suspended their contracts with Sharapova. While fans and press expressed surprise that Nike was so quick to put their sponsorship on hold, especially after sticking with Kobe Bryant and Oscar Pistorius long into rape and murder allegations, I argue that the response was so swiftly negative precisely because of the power Sharapova holds as a superaltern. She represents Nike at a scale where her trespasses reflect badly not simply on herself but on the brand. Whereas previous athletes had used their position to sow doubt with their denials, Sharapova took responsibility and became a universally affirmed dooper. When Maria Sharapova admitted to doping, it was as though Nike admitted to doping and had to quickly distance itself. The corporate behemoth that dragged its feet through scandals of US cyclist Lance Armstrong’s doping and its own company’s use of child labor, reacted to Maria Sharapova’s press conference within hours. While they ostensibly did so out of a fear for how her admission would affect consumer behavior, her speech act prompted Nike to respond; even if it was not in her favor, it was in response to her position in global power. Rather than being able to

³⁰²“Serena Williams ‘Surprised’ by Sharapova’s Announcement, Lauds Her for Taking Responsibility.”

³⁰³ ““Delayed Reaction.”

quietly abstain from renewing contracts, every one of her major sponsors was confronted by the press and forced to publicly choose a side. Not only were corporate entities expected to respond, but even the Kremlin and United Nations were approached.

While the ordinary elite may draw responses to scandals in their industries or home countries, Maria Sharapova sparked a debate that reached the elite circles of the corporate, athletic, and diplomatic spheres. The entities that distanced themselves from her, in a sense, expected the global-popular to revoke their consent to her power in favor of their ethical bounds on doping. Sharapova's racquet sponsor, Head, the only major brand that never wavered in its support, gambled that the people would stand by her regardless, while Nike and the United Nations bet on a critical mass turning against her, at least temporarily. The admission of her failed drug test became the catalyst for a public negotiation on hegemonic power.

Public sympathy and support for Sharapova from some major media outlets and sponsors signals that she has more power than WADA or the ITF over the public's world view on purity in sport. Exemplifying this, the *New York Times* sports section agreed with the ITF tribunal's determination that she mismanaged her professional responsibilities, but mostly focused blame on the failed process that led to the ban and poor communications between athletes and WADA.³⁰⁴ Fox Sports published an article with the straight forward title: "11 Problems With Maria Sharapova's Bogus Two-Year Suspension." Head released a statement reaffirming their support of Sharapova and claiming WADA failed to prove that meldonium enhances performance and should be banned at all.³⁰⁵ Nike, the first major

³⁰⁴ Clarey, "Maria Sharapova Bungled Her Doping Case, but Her Appeal Has a Chance."

³⁰⁵ Eliasch, "In Response to the ITF Tribunal Decision."

sponsor to leave, was also the first to come back—announcing their renewed partnership after the initial two-year suspension ruling in June, citing the ITF conclusion that the doping was not intentional.³⁰⁶ Bolstering her role as victim of a flawed system serves the opinion that she was pure of heart, preserving a worldview that favors her purity over that of the process. Even though Sharapova became famous by playing tennis, the sport has now become the vehicle by which she became superaltern, becoming more powerful even than the institutions that write the rules for her sport.

Across sports, competitors and fans conventionally viewed doping as an ultimate betrayal of the very nature of what sport should be. To test positive was to be shamed and disgraced. Maria Sharapova flipped the script by getting ahead of the story. Her top sponsors and even the press treated her as the victim of a flawed system. In a situation that exposed Sharapova at her most vulnerable, she was able to turn popular opinion against the doping authorities. Preceding this case, the most common critiques of anti-doping efforts in tennis, along with other anti-corruption efforts like the battle against match fixing, were that the authorities were not acting aggressively enough. Players, such as Andy Murray, demanded that more be done to keep the sport fair and rumors swirled about the tennis world that Nadal and Williams dope but the authorities do nothing because of the revenue they bring in as celebrity players. In taking such a strong stand against a popular player like Sharapova, the ITF may have reasonably expected to upset her fans but appeal to the broader tennis audience by demonstrating a commitment to sportsmanship and fairness. Instead, players, fans, and press rallied against the organization's ruling in the very name of fairness.

³⁰⁶ Yan, “Nike Stands by Maria Sharapova despite Two-Year Drug Ban.”

As superaltern, Sharapova swayed the public distrust of doping authorities from one that alleged inaction in matters pertaining to fairness on the tennis court to unfairness in CAS. By turning questions to technicalities of communication, excretion studies, and procedures, Sharapova managed to keep ethical questions of her behavior out of the scandal's main narrative. She successfully questioned how fair it was to add meldonium to the list and sentence her to a two-year ban, without ever offering a coherent explanation for why she took the medication prescribed by a Russian doctor every match day for ten years and never mentioned it to her US medical staff or the WTA doctors that treat ailments on site at tournaments. The medical references to Chernobyl were buried in legal filings and her memoirs only referenced the disaster by way of family history. Still, despite a ruling that explained she did not intentionally violate the rules but still had significant fault because of her suspicious but legal behavior, the press quickly sided with her, as did the sponsors, indicating they expected not only the tennis world but a global-popular to take her side in the case.

Maria Sharapova was able to get ahead of the story because of her superaltern position. With a tweet, she was able to summon major press agencies in a matter of hours and could be certain they would publish initial reports online before WADA or the ITF could put together full press releases. A lesser celebrity athlete may have been able to draw some reporters, but with a lower degree of public interest the press could have taken more time to put together stories and investigate the medication and its ban more thoroughly, rather than publishing early stories with only Maria Sharapova's perspective, which portrayed her as a strong woman taking responsibility when a bureaucratic regime was punishing her for their incompetence. She went into a potentially career ending situation and managed to leverage her power to look weak against the behemoth doping authorities.

People taking her side could see themselves as standing with a misunderstood, disenfranchised woman who tried to do everything right and got caught up in a complex administrative system that wanted to pry into her personal life—a more compelling narrative than siding with the top earning female athlete who never told her own team of the decade long use of a Latvian metabolic modulator. In turn, sponsors saw their revenue stream open back up. While support for Sharapova is not exactly unilateral, I use her relationship with Nike as a barometer to judge her global marketability, trusting that their public relations and marketing teams are better trained to assess her standing and likeability and project what the long-term effects of the scandal will be. She used her superaltern power to build consent for her behavior and put pressure on powerful institutions like Nike and WADA to walk back their positions.

In court, Sharapova used her wealth, status, and popularity as an argument that she should receive a significantly reduced sentence. While the full transcripts of the case are not available to the public, the decision details the full proceeding and arguments. Her lawyers argued that “any period of ineligibility would disproportionately affect Ms Sharapova in causing her a very substantial loss of earning and sponsorships, exclusion from the 2016 Olympics, and irreparable damage to her reputation.”³⁰⁷ Under the principle of proportionality, the defense argued that because she has so much fame and fortune built on a reputation for integrity and precision, she has more to lose than other athletes would in such a case. They therefore asked for a reduced sentence. The tribunal responded that “there is nothing unfair in the rules being fairly and equitably applied to this player as to any other

³⁰⁷ “The International Tennis Federation v. Maria Sharapova Decision.” Paragraph 102.

athlete.”³⁰⁸ Without shame, her lawyers argued that she should receive a lesser punishment entirely because she was more successful than others who had violated the same rule.

However, she framed it as an argument that the same punishment, a ban, would actually be a much more severe punishment because it could come at the cost of millions of dollars and an Olympic medal.

Subalterns

In November of 2016, eight months after the doping scandal broke, the UN Development Programme announced it would reinstate Maria Sharapova as Goodwill ambassador.³⁰⁹ Her namesake foundation had donated nearly half a million dollars to the Chernobyl region before the scandal. Her charitable contributions mostly benefitted youth projects and scholarship funds for rural children in Belarus.³¹⁰ Her profile on the UNDP page makes no mention of the break she had with the organization, touting her connection to the region and her work to support the ongoing efforts to support people who remained. These people she and the UN purport to help are the subalterns created by the reactor explosion in 1986. Whereas Sharapova as superaltern can wield her power to create discourse, the subalterns are continuously defined by that which happens around them, to them, outside of them. They are not given the voice to make truths about their own lives and experiences.

³⁰⁸ “The International Tennis Federation v. Maria Sharapova Decision.”

³⁰⁹ Roopnarine, “Maria Sharapova to Be Reinstated as UN Goodwill Ambassador.”

³¹⁰ “Maria Sharapova.”

The subtext of Sharapova’s remarks shared on her UNDP profile, implicitly marks the beneficiaries of the UN aid as weak, unproductive, and pathological. She is quoted as saying, “I am so glad to be able to see these inspiring children and the wonderful projects that my Foundation and UNDP have been supporting for the past two years. They are definitely a good example of how local communities can overcome the ‘victim syndrome,’ take greater control over their lives and build productive futures for themselves.”³¹¹ She and the UNDP place the impetus for improving living conditions on those people like the Poleschuk minority who were multiply victimized by technology and local and international government agencies. for generations. She is the perfect spokes model for the subtext, she is one of them, she is a biological citizen of Chernobyl, but since she was four years old, she and her father never stopped working and sacrificing so she could become a global superstar. As a top athlete, she specifically represents physical greatness and health, despite the underlying conditions that would later fuel the doping controversy. Her story of overcoming an early life marked by the disaster, serves as proof positive that it is possible, even if her story is marked by extraordinary luck and rare talent.

The way subaltern biological citizens of Chernobyl are systematically abjected by structures purporting to help them is captured in a 2002 report titled “The Human Consequences of the Chernobyl Nuclear Accident: A Strategy for Recovery.” The 78-page publication was commissioned by the UNDP and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), with support from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA) and the World Health Organization (WHO). The preface claims the intent of the agencies was to “to obtain up-to-date and credible information on the current conditions” in the region. The

³¹¹ “Maria Sharapova.”

goal was to “make recommendations as to how their needs can best be addressed in the light of this information.” In fact, the information deemed credible by the report, which I will discuss in more detail, is largely used to advance the narrative that folks in the region: (1) have victim syndrome,³¹² (2) were conditioned by the Soviet era to take advantage of the welfare state, and (3) need to be taught to take individual responsibility for their lives in a neoliberal fashion, with recommendations for financialization and privatization of the region.

The report alleges that the Soviet system of welfare provision “has promoted an exaggerated awareness of ill-health and a sense of dependency, which has prevented those concerned from taking part in normal economic and social life.”³¹³ It goes into more detail, explaining the pathology Sharapova referred to as “victim syndrome.” The report refers to an illness behavior it describes as “alterations in reproductive behaviour and changes in lifestyle factors, such as diet and tobacco and alcohol use.”³¹⁴ It continues that “people under such chronic stress make the transition from anxiety through depression, to a state of apathy and fatalism. The combined effect of the many sources of stress is a decline in the health and well-being of the affected populations.” The passage concludes that: “The situation encountered by the Mission in the affected territories is the result of 15 years of an

³¹² A pattern of identifying with victimhood that influences a person’s engagement with society and daily life UNDP and UNICEF, “The Human Consequences of the Chernobyl Nuclear Accident: A Strategy for Recovery,” 32.

³¹³ UNDP and UNICEF, 32.

³¹⁴ Reports on reproductive outcomes of the accident are contradictory. A 2006 report from the World Health Organization claimed that “Given the low radiation doses received by most people exposed to the Chernobyl accident, no effects on fertility, numbers of stillbirths, adverse pregnancy outcomes or delivery complications have been demonstrated nor are there expected to be any.” “WHO | Health Effects of the Chernobyl Accident.” However, a 2014 analysis of birth rates in the affected area concluded that “The birth deficit in the post-Soviet states for the ten years following Chernobyl was estimated at 2,072,666, of which 1,087,924 are accounted by Belarus and Ukraine alone.” Grech, “The Chernobyl Accident, the Male to Female Ratio at Birth and Birth Rates.”

unremitting downward spiral of health and well-being.”³¹⁵ The report plainly states that the people in Chernobyl are making themselves sick by worrying about the effects of radioactive contamination, which the report itself clearly states impacts many millions. By drawing attention to peoples’ lifestyle, it makes health a choice and creates a space for health agencies to emphasize people make lifestyle changes to improve health before they might be considered medically valid patients. This works as a cost-cutting measure, denying the need for care services and shifting blame to those seeking help.

Although the UN report mostly describes large scale trends and experiences—for instance stating that as of 2000, 23% of the Belarusian population lived on contaminated land and 148,274 total persons were registered as invalids—the report veers to the anecdotal to blame lifestyle for poor health outcomes.³¹⁶ The report tells the story of one woman they encountered, one of 858,646 liquidators, a designation that includes military and civil personnel like firefighters and transit workers with a special status conferred to recognize that they helped clean up nuclear fallout in some capacity. The report describes the woman in her late fifties as overweight and suffering from high blood pressure. “When asked whether she had tried to reduce her consumption of salt and fatty food, she replied: ‘Why should I? I’m a liquidator, I will die soon whatever I do’. Such feelings also are linked to a loss of initiative to solve the problems of sustaining an income and to dependency on

³¹⁵ UNDP and UNICEF, “The Human Consequences of the Chernobyl Nuclear Accident: A Strategy for Recovery,” 56–57.

³¹⁶ “Officially designated contaminated territories account for 23% of the surface area of Belarus, 5% of Ukraine and 1.5% of the Russian Federation. The population of these territories is around 6 million people: about 19% of the population of Belarus, 5% of the population of Ukraine and about 1% of the population of the Russian Federation. Serious concerns primarily relate to the so-called ‘highly contaminated territories’ where contamination is between 15 and 40 ci/km². At present between 150 and 200 thousand people permanently reside in these areas. The population of the zones with contamination exceeding 40 ci/km² is insignificant and not precisely known.” UNDP and UNICEF, 35.

assistance from the state.”³¹⁷ Rather than citing this as an example of an impoverished woman who most likely suffered tremendous losses and was irresponsibly put into the position to clean up nuclear waste at a time of disastrous misinformation campaigns, it is used as an example of lazy, apathetic people refusing to take responsibility for themselves.

The UN’s framing of the woman’s claim is rendered insignificant, vacuous, or logically even false. Sharapova’s universal affirmative that “local communities can overcome” is in a contradictory relation to the particular negative claim by the woman who, suggests some people cannot overcome when she says that she “will die soon” regardless of her choices. For the woman to be believed, would mean Sharapova and the UNDP’s claims would have to be false. In immediate inference using the square of opposition, falsity moves up while truth moves down. Rather than allowing for the anonymous woman’s claim to be truth that shows a falsity in its superaltern, she is discredited and the power relations of immediate inference of who can speak Truth is maintained. Her choices are used to discredit the need for ongoing healthcare in the region.

The UN report claims that some people returned to the Chernobyl region specifically to exploit the social services offered there at the expense of neoliberal progress. Relying again on an individual case to claim a systemic issue, the report mentions its authors “met tractor mechanics in a bankrupt farm in the Briansk Region of Russia who were not being paid, but who had turned down an opportunity to open their own workshop for fear of losing Chernobyl entitlements.”³¹⁸ The story positions Soviet era entitlements against neoliberal opportunities for residents to gain financial independence by starting a business. Neoliberal

³¹⁷ UNDP and UNICEF, 49.

³¹⁸ UNDP and UNICEF, 31–32.

development is consistently highlighted as a strategy for recovery from the nuclear disaster. “pilot projects already successfully undertaken by UNDP and other agencies demonstrate the possibility of promoting household level businesses and self-sufficiency through credit unions.”³¹⁹ The introduction of Western capitalist banking and financial systems and independence from the community and government, the UN proposes, would lessen the burden on the supporting agencies, which the report claim are overburdened by the locals with victim syndrome, illness behavior, and a Soviet era dependence on welfare. In making such allegations, the UN downplays the mechanisms medical anthropologists³²⁰ have documented were put in place to limit even legitimate claims of adverse health outcomes from radiation exposure.

Medical anthropologist Adriana Petryna studied responses of the medical-labor committee, which was in charge of evaluating folks from the contaminated area to assess their “level of disability (or loss of labor capacity)” and determine the legitimacy of the claims as Chernobyl related. Members of the committee told her, “the majority of all disability claims were channeled through neurological wards on account of a variety of nervous system disorders.” She adds, “it was unclear whether these disorders stemmed from social stress owing to the country’s dire economic situation or from Chernobyl’s radiation exposure, or from some combination of the two.”³²¹ The purpose is for the committee to issue a letter that attests to the person being a certified victim of the disaster, which “entitles its bearer to social protections in the form of pensions, health care, and even education

³¹⁹ UNDP and UNICEF, 26.

³²⁰ See Petryna, *Life Exposed*; Brown, *Manual for Survival*.

³²¹ Petryna, *Life Exposed*, 19.

benefits for children” that are much more valuable than for regular citizens. In 2000, a regular citizen would receive a \$12 monthly social insurance, a person classified as “sufferer” of the radiation would receive \$20, and someone disabled by the event could earn as much as \$90 monthly benefits.³²²

Being diagnosed with particular conditions paid well, and some people found themselves paying bribes to doctors in exchange for the coveted diagnoses. Ten years after the disaster, Petryna interviewed a woman, Rita Dubova, who was a gatekeeper at the NPP posted a few hundred meters away from Reactor 4’s wall. Six hours after the explosion, she clocked in at work without any protective gear because she was afraid to lose her pension if she abandoned. In 1996, she was still fighting to have her Acute Radiation Syndrome (ARS) recognized and be upgraded from level two to one so she could earn a better pension and leave something for her family. Her son, a nuclear worker, was blinded after he spent five hours welding a pipe spewing radioactive steam the Chernobyl NPP in 1984; he was not compensated for the incident. Many of Rita’s colleagues had died in intermittent years, but her boss was still alive and she had struggled to reach him in those ten years so he could sign a former confirming her work at the site and level of exposure. A Japanese physician who studied Hiroshima estimated her life expectancy to be another five years considering her dose. She travelled to Moscow seeking medical treatment for ARS, was eventually admitted with that diagnosis, but her records were swiftly changed to say she had VvD. Rita was released with the note, “neurotic state based in a residual organic background and vegetovascular dystonia.” Months later, she was admitted into another hospital and given the ARS diagnosis, but the circumstance of treatment and legal recognition were murky.

³²² Petryna, 19.

Petryna found that hospital in Kiev kept a secret, unregistered list of patients being treated for ARS. Over the years, Rita routinely had her diagnosis changed. In one hospital, in 1992, she found out that a woman she shared a hospital room with had bribed staff to get Rita's test results and diagnosis written into her file instead. The roommate brought the hospital staff "coffee, cognac, chocolate candies." Rita alleged that, in exchange for the rare goods, the staff wrote Rita's blood indicators into the other woman's file. Rita's significant health issues could have pushed that woman into a better compensated welfare category. A physician at the hospital threatened Rita with more trouble getting medical care if she were to tell anyone about the transaction. Rita told Petryna, "The acute gets \$325.00 a month. I get \$75.00 a month. That woman knew what she was doing." As horrible as Rita's treatment was, having her acutely ill blood indicators sold off to another woman trying to access more disability payments, Petryna posits she had a certain level of privilege for receiving care in the first place.³²³

Rita's story, and the countless others like it that were not recorded and published, the stories that were deliberately obscured, hidden, and erased from public memory map the experiences of Chernobyl's biological citizens onto the square of opposition. Rita and the people who share her experience are in a subaltern or contradictory position the superalterns. Their stories and experiences are the particular, whereas Maria Sharapova and the United Nations occupy a position of the universal. In global power to shift discourse, their testimony supersedes that of individuals with little recourse to prove illness without support of the scientific institutions they would depend on to assess their health. Furthermore, their bodies are turning on them and erasing the direct ties. As the radioactive material that

³²³ Petryna, 121–26.

caused structural changes in their bodies deteriorates and cannot be traced so many years after exposure, doses are impossible to prove along with the causality needed to make the medical claim.

Approaches to understanding the UNDP's motivations to perpetuate a discourse that people in the Chernobyl region have victim syndrome and suggests neoliberal practices as a remedy to nuclear fallout can be gleaned from Kate Brown's analysis of international responses to the disaster. The World Health Organization is one of the UN agencies that commissioned the report. They were also the first group to send foreign experts to Chernobyl to assess the health consequence; however, the commission they sent was composed of physicists, not physicians.³²⁴ After touring the region, the WHO officials concluded that "any association between the reported rise in noncancerous disease and Chernobyl fallout was a mistake of 'scientists who are not well versed in radiation'" and blamed stress.³²⁵ Using findings from a Hiroshima study, they suggested raising the permissible lifetime dose of radiation two or threefold, which would be ten or fifteen times higher than the IAEA recommendation.³²⁶ Local scientists who questioned the validity of comparing a single bomb blast to long-term low dose exposure were censored and ridiculed by Soviet authorities, who wanted to minimize the bad publicity.

To acknowledge the risk of low dose exposure would have been an affront to what Western superpowers with nuclear capabilities had been promising their own citizens. In Brown's words: "For Western radiologists to seriously consider the full range of evidence

³²⁴ Brown, *Manual for Survival*, 211.

³²⁵ Brown, 211.

³²⁶ Brown, 211.

Soviet doctors presented would have called into question an entire medical infrastructure and wiped out a lifetime of publications and assurances that the public was safe from exposures to fallout from bomb tests, radioactive waste, medical treatments, and daily emissions from neighboring nuclear power plants.”³²⁷ As health issues became a major concern in Chernobyl, the UN General Assembly realized it may have erred in the WHO’s initial response and in 1991 pledged to raise \$646M to pay for a large scale health study and the relocation of hundreds of thousands of people. However, the IAEA just released a “no effect” report and the GA only raised \$6M. The American government cited the report as a specific reason not to contribute. Only in 1996 did the IAEA admit there were long term health impacts, at which point Angela Merkel called for a large-scale study; the study was never done.³²⁸

The UN’s most powerful members had and continue to have a vested interest in minimizing the perceived damage. For health and nuclear agencies to admit a causal link between the governments’ actions, like testing bombs and permitting nuclear power plants, would be a massive liability. Their universally proposed truths that low dose radiation is harmless subalternates the particular claims of individuals who say they suffered as a result of exposure. As Brown explains with regard to all the disease and cancers that appeared in the region in the years that followed the disaster, “a correlation does not prove a connection. Radiation could be the cause or it easily could not.”³²⁹ Without a large-scale epidemiological study, the causation cannot be proven. Considering the lack of a comprehensive long-term

³²⁷ Brown, 262.

³²⁸ Brown, 258–60.

³²⁹ Brown, 66.

study, the United Nation's continued claim that only around 35 or 50 people died as a result of the accident stands. None of the other deaths can be definitively tied to the events in 1986. By denying the scale of the impact and thwarting research into it, the UN uses its position to maintain and build its own power and that of its most powerful member states. It does so by further subalternating the experience of the systematically disempowered people in the Chernobyl region.

Conclusion: Solving a Problem Like Maria

In 2010, the UNDP posted a video of Maria Sharapova in Belarus that exemplifies how power of and over Chernobyl's biological citizens was structured after the Atomic Age. It begins with her hitting some tennis balls with local kids on a court in Gomel. It cuts to a press conference in a drab gymnasium with Sharapova and four men sitting front of an enormous UNDP banner. A man announces she had just decided to donate \$250,000 to the region. She explains that the donation will be allocated to sports related programs and says, "I really believe that's really important in these environments. One of the most important things for me is to get the children to be active and to go outside and play sports." The video's caption adds, that a 2005 report "involving eight specialized UN agencies and the governments of Belarus, Russia and the Ukraine, found that although the health-related effects of the disaster have cleared up, poverty and diseases related to alcohol, smoking, stress and poor diets remain serious threats to people living in the region."³³⁰ The narrative constructed is that sports allowed Sharapova to make it, even though she was from the region, and so these kids other kids could too, so long as they resist the social ills of drugs

³³⁰ *Maria Sharapova, UNDP Goodwill Ambassador in Belarus.*

and alcohol and embrace the UNDPs efforts of financialization and industrialization. While celebrating Sharapova's donation, the UNDP reassures the global public that actually everything is fine and the people who continue to suffer do so at their own making.

Sharapova, as superaltern biological citizen, builds her power through her relationship with the UN in a manner that empowers the UN through the furthered subalternation of her subaltern co-citizens. In this sense, the super and subalterns of power formations after the Atomic Age continue to move further apart, widening the power gap between the top and bottom strata of Chernobyl's biological citizens. As Goodwill Ambassador, Sharapova plays a dual role representing the UN's "goodwill" and being an ambassador for the biological citizens of Chernobyl showing the global public that the UN's goodwill is in good faith. Although, as I argue, there is evidence to suggest her health may have been adversely impacted by the disaster, setting off the chain of events that led to her 15-month suspension, she also describes the disaster as the reason she plays tennis, having set off the chain of events that led her family to the tennis courts in Sochi years later.

In the International Tennis Federation's 2016 tribunal hearings of Maria Sharapova's doping case, foundational principles of justice and equality were discussed. Multi-national corporations prepared comments on the ruling. The UN and the Kremlin expressed concern for how it could reflect on them, neither wanting to be associated with cheating. While Maria Sharapova is certainly a member of the global elite, I argue that she is more than that. Her power to affect discourse, to mobilize masses of people on her behalf, and to make some of the world's most powerful corporate and governmental entities respond to her, mark her as a superaltern. The superaltern is the highest of the high, not defined by any one metric like wealth or Twitter followers. The superaltern's power becomes visible through shifts in the global-popular's world view and the ability to maintain consent to his or her status.

Understanding how superalterns build and wield their power is necessary to understand how subalterns are oppressed and can be used to build resistance against the globalized power structures that are accountable to superalterns. Her collaboration with some of the entities that share responsibility for oppressing and silencing victims of the disaster who continue to go uncounted bookends the global response to Chernobyl. The superaltern is used to discredit the subaltern and move the global public's perception in favor of the former. The UN and local government agencies systematically discredit claims of ill health caused by radiation on the grounds of not being able to prove causality by a handful of affirmative particulars, while thwarting all efforts at large scale epidemiological studies that could shed light on what long-term low dose radiation does to the human body.

Women's tennis history is defined by the contributions of individuals I would describe as superalterns. Billie Jean King, Martina Navratilova, Chris Evert, are just some of the women shifted public perception at various points and made the WTA the most successful women's sport organization in the world by many measures. The power that comes from being a top tennis player, however, is in no way absolute. As I have shown throughout the previous chapters, even the most successful players are impacted by misogynistic and homophobic discourses. The woman who may be the greatest player to ever pick up a racquet is intersectionally oppressed as a Black woman. Serena Williams occupies a social position that significantly weighs on her public perception and ability to sway the consent of global publics. She is ultrawealthy and has a global fan following, but as I detail in the following chapter, this does nothing to insulate her from racism and abjection. Showing the limits of trying to map contemporary problems on millennia old concepts of classical philosophy, Williams exemplifies the complex position of representing

social progress to the public while exemplifying that racist sexism is endemic through all social strata.

Chapter 5

This Tournament Will Be Tweeted:

Serena Williams and Multi-Channel Self-Branding

If Serena Williams taps the screen of her phone in all the right places, she can send 160 characters of her choice to the Twitter streams of her 10.8 million followers. She can share a photo to 13 million Instagram followers, or write a post to appear on the newsfeeds of her 7 million Facebook fans. On Snapchat she can post short clips that are only available to be streamed for a twenty-four-hour period before self-destructing. A frequent user of all of these media channels, Serena Williams is using self-branding to reclaim her own public persona and write a counter narrative to what the traditional media have constructed over the early years of her career.

Reading between the lines of tennis discourse requires contextualizing comments from players and press in their specific cultural locations. Regarding race analysis in the US, this is a particularly daunting task because of the frequent rapid shifts in the language and constructions of racial identities and racist ideology. Half of Americans found racism to be a “big problem” in a 2015 Pew Research Center survey. This was a steep increase from only 33% of Americans agreeing to the statement in 2009.³³¹ The increase in awareness was statistically significant across all demographic lines and most pronounced among white Americans. Since the first time Pew asked the question in 1995, the number who saw racism as a significant problem had been steadily decreasing until 2010 when it began to rise again

³³¹ Street et al., “Across Racial Lines, More Say Nation Needs to Make Changes to Achieve Racial Equality.”

sharply. This is not to suggest that racism was, in fact, ever less of a problem, but that people did not see it as such leading into the contemporary moment when half of Americans recognize it. The numbers declined as American dominant publics adopted an ideology of colorblindness; they pushed back against programs like affirmative action that were designed to help correct some of the legacies of blatantly racist practices of earlier eras. Pew's polls reveal that a quickly increasing number of Americans no longer believe that racism is in the past. To trace the trajectory of racism and how it is mediated in the US, I turn to American tennis player Serena Williams. As a Black woman dominating a historically white sport for over a decade, she has been dealing with racism in the public spotlight, concurrent with the timeframe when the shifts the Pew surveys observed happened.

In this chapter, I focus on two particular moments in Williams' career that brought racism in US tennis culture to the forefront. Bookended by the 2001 and 2015 Indian Wells tournaments, I examine how racism and resistance shifted in that time frame, specifically as it pertains to Serena Williams' personal brand. Between the two tournaments, social media and technological advances enabled easy documentation and distribution of events and ideas. I argue that new media has made it more difficult for dominant publics to continue to sincerely believe longstanding stereotypes about Williams. I use the term public here to describe ordinary people who may not have a particular interest in tennis but generally follow major news stories, such as those reported on by mass publications and broadcasters like *The New York Times* and CNN; they may even know Serena Williams by her first name alone. To contextualize this argument, I begin by explaining the relevant points of what happened at the 2001 and 2015 Indian Wells, and the sisters' relationship with the public going into the first major controversy of their careers. I then explain the critical race

theoretical frameworks I engage with to analyze the events in context. From there, I work through the theoretical concepts as they align with Serena Williams' career specifically to show that social media has opened up a new space to counter racist narratives about her and make it harder people to maintain a sincere ignorance about Williams, exposing certain fictions as willfully racist. This demonstrates aspects of how discourses of race circulate through elite women's tennis and its global media.

From the early days of their career, the two sisters were marked as outsiders to professional tennis. When the two of them stuck together at tournaments, rather than engaging competitors in small talk, they would typically be described as being antisocial, arrogant, or generally having attitude problems. Communication scholar Sarah Projansky explains that the "attitude" or "resistance" ascribed to the Williams sisters was a construction, not a reflection of their behavior. For example, she maintains: "I do not argue that Venus is 'actually' a resistant girl; rather I argue that media depictions make Venus *available* as a resistant girl. In other words, media *produce and provide* the resistant girl, even when her resistance, paradoxically, is to the media themselves."³³² Similarly, Serena, when resistant to the racialized media narratives of her black girlhood, came to be portrayed as generally resistant to the established norms of behavior and etiquette on the tour. To be seen as anything but resistant, the sisters had to work hard to craft their own representations as possible. Serena Williams has used various types of media to develop sophisticated "self-branding." Media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser explains, "self-branding is positioned by

³³² Projansky, *Spectacular Girls*, 131.

marketers and brand managers as the proper way—perhaps even the necessary way—to ‘take care of oneself’ in contemporary advanced capitalist economy.”³³³

Even as young girls, Serena and Venus were interested in framing representations in the face of mainstream media. In 1998 they launched a newsletter, “Tennis Monthly Recap,” printing 50 to 500 copies and distributing it in locker rooms at professional tournaments. The newsletter included tennis news, gossip, interviews, and stories about the sisters’ dogs. In the face of negative representations, they did what they could to take control of their brand, to show an intelligent, entrepreneurial, and playful side. As Ben Rothenberg at the *New York Times* later commented: “At a time when they were already two of the most talked about and polarizing athletes in the world, the sisters produced a newsletter that was at once playful yet professional, whimsical yet comprehensive, fluffy yet substantive.”³³⁴

2001: “Booing lustily like some kind of genteel lynch mob”

On Thursday, March 14, 2001 at the Indian Wells tournament in southern California’s Palm Springs, Serena Williams, 19, was slated to play her older sister Venus Williams, 20, in a semi-final match. The match was promoted to be a significant face-off between two players who had garnered a great deal of attention early in their careers. It had been two years since Serena Williams was on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* with the headline: “Little Sister, Big Hit: A Williams family surprise—Serena wins the U.S. Open.” The teaser for the feature story seeded the imagination that would frame scandals for years to come: “Father Knew Best: With her galvanizing win at the U.S. Open, Serena Williams

³³³ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM*, 54.

³³⁴ Rothenberg, “The Serena and Venus Tribune.”

proved Dad right—he predicted that she, not older sister Venus, would be the better player—but may have created family tension.”³³⁵

Early on match day, Venus Williams told tournament officials that she would withdraw due to tendinitis. Hours later, officials first made the public announcement of the cancellation to a fully seated stadium four minutes before play was to begin; the organizers claimed they themselves were only notified minutes before. Almost immediately, rumors of match-fixing began to circulate; national press and fans accused the sisters’ coach and father Richard Williams of orchestrating the late withdrawal for financial gain.³³⁶

When Serena Williams walked onto center court of the same stadium for the championship final that Saturday, two days after the cancellation, the crowd erupted in jeers directed at the player who grew up in Compton, just two hours away; as explained later, the content of the jeers has been disputed. Kim Clijsters, the Belgian opponent, was cheered enthusiastically throughout the entire match, something generally unheard of when a local athlete is competing against an international opponent. Tennis is broadly considered to have culture of politeness, and as Serena Williams described looking back in her autobiography, “in Palm Springs, especially, they tended to be a pretty well-heeled, too. But I looked up and all I could see was a sea of rich people—mostly older, mostly white—standing and booing lustily like some kind of genteel lynch mob.”³³⁷ With an incredible level of mental strength

³³⁵ Price, “Little Sister, Big Hit.”

³³⁶ Drucker, “The Story Behind the Williamses and Indian Wells.”

³³⁷ Williams and Paisner, *On the Line*, 70.

to play in such a hateful environment, at times so distressed she cried into her towel, Williams prevailed and won the match in three sets.³³⁸

On-site reporters scarcely mentioned the possibility that anything racist had transpired except to deny it. The media cameras and on court microphones picked up a loud chorus of boos, but individual slurs and words cannot be made out, drowned under the masses. A *New York Times* reporting on the boos makes no mention that it could have been racially motivated but does note Venus was on-site “revealing no sign of a limp, no wrap on her controversial right knee.” Nine days later, *USA Today* was the first major publication to print clear allegations from the family, quoting Richard Williams saying, When Venus and I were walking down the stairs to our seats, people kept calling me ‘n-----.’ One said, ‘I wish it was ‘75, we’d skin you alive.’ I think Indian Wells disgraced America.”³³⁹

In response to the whole ordeal, Venus and Serena Williams vowed never to play the tournament again, accepting the Women’s Tennis Association’s punishments for refusing a mandatory tournament.³⁴⁰ In October, Serena Williams made that announcement to the *New York Times*, explaining, “I’m not going to be playing at Indian Wells [...] I’ve had some extremely life-altering things that happened to me there.”³⁴¹ For over a decade, as the sisters racked up titles all over the world and became the biggest stars of tennis, they continued to

³³⁸ Williams and Paisner, 75.

³³⁹ Drucker, “The Story Behind the Williamses and Indian Wells.”

³⁴⁰ In 2009, Indian Wells was added to a new tier of events. Accordingly: “WTA rules punish players who skip one of the tour’s so-called mandatory events. The Williams sisters are sustaining injury to their world rankings, losing money from the bonus pool and must perform a day of tennis-related activity within 125 miles of Indian Wells or face a two-week suspension and a \$75,000 fine.” What penalties, if any were leveraged against the sisters has not been publicized. Oberjuege, “No Changing the Williams Sisters’ Minds.”

³⁴¹ Drucker, “The Story Behind the Williamses and Indian Wells.”

brush off suggestions that they return to Indian Wells, the largest tournament outside of the Slams and only two hours from Serena Williams' LA home.

2015: "Faith that fans at Indian Wells have grown"

In February 2015, Serena Williams wrote an op-ed for *Time Magazine* to announce she would play the Indian Wells tournament again; she referred vaguely to faith and spoke of teachings to love and forgive freely for the unexpected change of heart, while not naming these as central to her religion, Jehovah's Witness. When the March tournament started, it drew an unprecedented amount of press attention. Because of my own work as a freelance tennis writer and photographer, I was credentialed media for the tournament and able to participate in all press events and attend matches. Preceding tournament play, a special press conference was scheduled just for Serena Williams, which was unusual and spoke to the attention organizers anticipated she would receive. She mostly repeated sentiments from her *Time Magazine* op-ed saying: "I have faith that fans at Indian Wells have grown with the game and know me better than they did in 2001."³⁴² The night of her first match, the crowd greeted her with a standing ovation and she cried tears she would later describe as born of relief. As she climbed up the tournament ladder with successive wins, the pressure and attention eased and press conferences shifted to routine tennis fare. While she had made race and racism central to her return, forcing a confrontation with the issue, the framing of forgiveness allowed the space, at least superficially, to revert back to colorblindness.

The night of Serena Williams' semi-final match, the stadium was filled with fans watching the match before her, German Sabine Lisicki versus Serbian Jelena Jankovic.

³⁴² Williams, "Serena Williams."

Toward the end of that match, Williams stunned the tournament and fans by announcing on Instagram: “4 months ago I began a journey to play Indian Wells and it was amazing. I never dreamed I could do it. But I would not have been able to do this without my fans. Though it ended early due to injury this year, I have to say I cannot wait to try again next year.”³⁴³ While the press balcony filled up with tense reporters waiting to find out if the good cheer would suddenly give way to a resentment simmering under the crowd’s surface, fans slowly filtered out of the stadium, presumably seeing notifications of the schedule change on their cell phones or reading social media reports. Williams made an on-court announcement after the preceding match, at which point about half of the audience had quietly left. She explained her injury to an on-court emcee, joked about what a great time she had at the tournament, and walked out signing autographs, and those who had stayed long enough to listen to her full statement sent her off with a standing ovation. If anyone on site that week resented Williams for dropping out, they were quiet about it. Many details of the two semi-final withdrawals are the same, but whereas the Williams sisters were forced on conventional media to relay their perspective in 2001, the 2015 tournament could be tweeted.

The Williams sisters’ careers have been marked by extremes of racism and adulation. Their dominance in the sport has made it impossible to ignore them and their years of prominence has left vast archives to analyze. I specifically chose to analyze these two tournaments because of the parallels in comparing how the event of withdrawing last minute from a match due to injury unfolded. In both cases, a Williams sister cited a knee injury as she withdrew from a semi-final match. The announcements were made to

³⁴³ “Serena Williams.”

audiences in the same stadium, with many of the same reporters covering the events. Despite the similarities, the narratives that framed the events diverged greatly. How they diverged tell the story of major shifts in race, racism, media, and branding in just over a decade.

In the fourteen interim years, the development and popularization of alternative ways to communicate gave Williams new ways to communicate with the public, and it became clear she would be a fixture at the top of the sport and anyone publishing about women's tennis would have to publish about her. For comparison, in 2001 Serena Williams had no way to communicate with fans directly that did not rely on editors and producers giving her a platform to speak freely; in 2015 she had amassed 5.6 million Twitter followers and 2.2 million fans on Instagram whom she could broadcast to instantly; which is to say she did not need to rely on conventional media for self-promotion.

Serena Williams uses new media to counter dominant narratives and adds levels of complexity to her public image by also keeping a foot in the door of the traditional media through press conferences and feature interviews. While the popularized media image of Serena Williams, as I will show later, is one of aggression, anger, and generally raucous personality deemed unbecoming of a tennis player, she has been able to subvert this perception through her Twitter, Instagram, and other media innovations. I term what she does "multi-channel self-branding" to say that the complex persona of herself is crafter through a number of media, at times conveying different messages to different audiences; she makes branding an active and deliberate process that she exerts editorial control over. This multi-channel approach feeds in with the other information and representations that audiences receive and, in many cases, works to offer a counter narrative or at least counter framing to what publications outside her control publish. This in turn creates a space for

white audiences to question to framing they had previously been exposed to through conventional media and forces a deeper conflict in which ones to believe or take seriously.

In writing about the Williams sisters and the 2001 Indian Wells tournament, sports studies scholar Nancy E. Spencer develops her concept of “sincere fictions.” She argues that white audiences must sincerely believe certain fictions to participate in racist systems without acknowledging their own complicity in perpetuating racism. “What obscures the reality of racism for most (Whites) is the creation of sincere fictions that enable Whites to resolve the dissonance between beliefs in equality and participation in racist society.”³⁴⁴ This allows white people to act in racist ways, such as white officials levying record-breaking fines to punish Serena Williams for minor rules violations, while believing they are not racist. These white actors can tell themselves that because the racism is not the overt intent, their actions are not racist. For example, when Serena Williams faced record-high fines for racquet abuse in 2009’s US Open, white fans could sincerely believe the exorbitantly inflated fine was because as the top ranked player she is held to the highest standard of sportsmanship. Williams, they argued, should be held to higher standard of behavior as a role model, and so the fine was discursively distanced from a long legacy of officials using lies and disciplinary regimes to violently punish Black people for alleged transgressions under the guise of playing by the rules. For example, poet and MacArthur Genius Grant recipient Claudia Rankine, a Black woman and tennis fan, explained that the official ruling was to be made only in the context of that particular match, but “it is not difficult to think that if Serena lost context by abandoning all rules of civility, it could be because her body, trapped in a racial imaginary, trapped in disbelief—code for being black

³⁴⁴ Spencer, “Sister Act VI: Venus and Serena Williams at Indian Wells: ‘Sincere Fictions’ and White Racism,” 119.

in America—is being governed not by the tennis match she is participating in but by a collapsed relationship that [she] had promised to play by the rules.”³⁴⁵ This sincere fiction, that Williams was harshly punished because she was the top player, maintains a plausible deniability for the racist motivations or intent of the officials punishing her. So sincere fictions allow white fans to believe Serena Williams is governed by the common rules of women’s tennis that all players must abide by, but really, the rules collude with racial bias and are enforced differently.

Over the years, individual tennis officials and press have been called out for racism, such as a Russian tennis official who was fined and banned after referring to the “Williams Brothers.” Following an international media outrage over the incident, the international governing bodies acknowledged his statement was sexist and racist and punished him as an individual bigot acting alone.³⁴⁶ By punishing the official, higher ranking tour officials publicly washed their hands of his ideology, without confronting the organization’s internal problems that may have led him to think what he said would be acceptable in the first place. Serena Williams cited the series of events as inspiration to return to Indian Wells: “when Russian official Shamil Tarpishev made racist and sexist remarks about Venus and me, the WTA and [United States Tennis Association] immediately condemned him. It reminded me how far the sport has come, and how far I’ve come too.”³⁴⁷ While this reminds readers of the fact that the racist-sexist comments were made, the focus is on a progress narrative that

³⁴⁵ Rankine, *Citizen*, 30.

³⁴⁶ “Serena Williams Responds to Russian Tennis Federation Official’s Comments, Supports Suspension.”

³⁴⁷ Williams, “Serena Williams.”

things have changed and that blatant, public discrimination is not accepted by international tennis standards.

The focus on the valuation and role of the body in professional tennis is particularly necessary in looking at how an injury to Venus Williams' knee precipitated the racist jeers the family faced at Indian Wells. This emphasis on the Black athlete's body is covertly but insidiously linked to scientific racism.³⁴⁸ Spencer, who writes about the sincere fictions white audiences tell themselves, analyzes the legacy of scientific racism and argues that while it may be more coded now than at its peak in the early half of the twentieth century, it persists in sport and can be seen in the public obsession with the Black athletic body. Scientific racism essentializes the athletic performance into a biological frame and displaces the roles of hard work and mental acuity from the source and cause of Black athletes' accomplishments. Clearly, jeering white fans at 2001 Indian Wells tried to revoke the value of the Williams sisters' contribution to tennis when one of them did not perform the physical function of playing for them, even claiming that her injury was not legitimate, thereby claiming their knowledge of her body was superior to hers. The claim to her body and work is an uncanny mirror of enslavement ideology from Romans forcing slaves into the gladiatorial combat to the Antebellum South.

To understand the role of regimes of knowing in this context, I turn to Charles W. Mills' 2007 work on *White Ignorance* as a way that the media continue to perpetuate colorblind racism. This is particularly relevant to understand how Williams' statements to media were dismissed and ignored when she spoke of racism in the weeks following the 2001 Indian Wells tournament. Mills argues, "If black testimony could be aprioristically

³⁴⁸ Adjepong and Carrington, "Black Female Athletes as Space Invaders."

rejected because it was likely to be false, it could also be aprioristically rejected because it is true.”³⁴⁹ White publics have constituted Black peoples’ allegations of racism as lies due to a vested interest in preserving ignorance and because of a fear that it could be true, which would undermine post-racial goals. For example, Serena Williams saying that a fan yelled for her to “go back to Compton” and her father hearing the N-word being directed at him were dismissed and ignored by the mainstream media as much for supposedly being false and incendiary, and in my analysis, they were dismissed out of fear they could be true. After bolstering claims that Venus Williams’ testimony about her body was false, the press went on to dismiss Richard Williams’ and Serena Williams’ testimonies about their experience.

Allegations that Venus dropped out for match fixing purposes rather than an actual injury, had painted the Williams family as liars and gave the press an intrigue to report on. *The New York Times*’ initial report on Serena Williams’ match mentioned that Venus Williams was not limping, as though not limping was tantamount to being able to play a competitive tennis match. The article referred to her “penchant for disappearing from tournaments” that has “ruined her credibility” and explained further dismissals of the Williams family’s side of the story by saying father Richard Williams’ “string of wild tales over the years has left his denials [of match fixing] hollow.”³⁵⁰ This systematic rejection of Williams’ testimony laid the foundation for denying their claims of racism that was in turn based on allegations that they conspired to lie about the semi-final match in the first place. In the absence of quickly accessible statements from the Williams family themselves as is customary now with social media, the *New York Times* popularized a narrative that

³⁴⁹ Mills, “White Ignorance,” 32.

³⁵⁰ Roberts, “Serena Williams Wins As the Boos Pour Down.”

immediately painted them as liars. As I will explain with further analysis of news coverage of the 2001 Indian Wells tournament, mainstream press readership was not given enough information to form a nuanced opinion of the event, but they were evidently given enough to become resentful of Serena Williams.

Building on Mills' work, Paula Ioanide's scholarship on race and affect argues, "Like a public secret that a majority of people participate in but rarely articulate in collective and conscious ways, the epistemologies of white ignorance teach us how *not* to understand the ways that systematic racial and gender oppression is reproduced."³⁵¹ With varying degrees of active participation and plausible deniability, the white tennis public and media have constructed a narrative of the 2001 Indian Wells tournament that resists and questions any outright and unwavering statement of blatant racism against the Williams family. In the absence of videos shot on cell phones and corroboration from White tournament officials or journalists, the White public is taught not to know with certainty that these violences ever occurred. Race, though only seldom named in a colorblind mainstream media landscape, features strongly in the subtext of the narrative that press tell of Serena Williams' life.

Serena Williams' uplift functions as a specifically colorblind narrative in which racism has been overcome a priori. Commenters are freed by the progress sisters made individually, by lifting their family out of poverty and becoming multi-millionaires in a capitalist society. Before Serena Williams was able to leverage her powers of fame and social media to force the conversation about her racial identity and the racism she faced. While the Williams family's Blackness is evident in pictures, it remained largely unnamed in most press coverage of them before the 2015 Indian Wells tournament; the sisters were

³⁵¹ Ioanide, *The Emotional Politics of Racism*, 11.

virtually never described in terms of race or ethnicity. Social theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that colorblindness “race-bait[s] less explicitly” than overt racism “while making full use of traditional stereotypes.”³⁵² At the same time, as Sumi Cho argues, “under post-racialism, race does not matter, and should not be taken into account of even noticed. Thus, one who points out racial inequities risks being characterized as an obsessed-with-race racist who is unfairly and divisively ‘playing the race card.’”³⁵³ Drawing on both of these insights, I argue that portraying Serena Williams, the media make full use of stereotypes without the explicit mention of race and attendant racism. To name just two examples, the press referred to her celebratory dance as a “Crip Walk,” a dance move created by a member of Los Angeles gang the Crips, and opponent Caroline Wozniacki did an impersonation of Serena Williams by stuffing one towel in her shirt and another in her skirt at an off-season exhibition event.³⁵⁴ Claims of racism were quickly rejected by the accused and their defenders, attempting to flip the script by suggesting that those who took offense were the ones bringing race into the conversation.

Serena Williams has now used her power as the top player for many years running to force the traditional media in 2015 to acknowledge that racism was part of the issue at Indian Wells in 2001. While publicly punishing incidents of overt racism, the tennis community is tacitly allowing tropes of post-raciality to continue a public discrimination and demeaning treatment of Venus and Serena Williams. I use the category and practice of colorblindness to describe individuals’ practices and the ideology that posits racism can be

³⁵² Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 218.

³⁵³ Cho, “Post-Racialism,” 1594.

³⁵⁴ Rankine, *Citizen*, 34–36.

overcome if race and racism are no longer worked through in explicit terms like race and Blackness. Post-raciality indexes that colorblind ideology has taken hold broadly enough that racism is not an issue in contemporary society, an idea the Pew research shows has recently begun to fall out of favor. By publicly proclaiming her side of the story on social media, any denial or pretense of ignorance on behalf of the traditional media is implausible.

Following years of popular narratives that presented negative images of Serena Williams as an aggressive, masculine, angry Black woman, she has used social media to brand herself in a way that undercuts the media images of her, such as by posting pictures of herself playing with her Yorkshire terrier Chip, dancing around the practice court, and doing mundane things like getting dinner with friends. As Alice Marwick, a media and technology studies scholar, argues: social media is a place of socialization and users present different sides of themselves just as self-presentation changes in everyday interactions and is variable between the contexts like the workplace or a bar.³⁵⁵ Serena Williams uses social media to show her off-court, out of work persona, countering the intensity of her on-court persona that is more familiar to mass audiences who see her matches. During the Indian Wells tournament in 2015, she used social media to show herself as an individual who had been hurt by racism and refused to be silent about it while also refusing to be defined by it. These conditions created a peculiar situation for the press that was outwardly sympathetic to the racism she endured while historicizing it and attempting to deliver her light-hearted self-directed brand as a conciliatory sign of growth that serves a colorblind ideology.

³⁵⁵ Marwick and Boyd, "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately," 114.

Palimpsest: Colorblind Coverage of Blatant Racism

Palimpsest describes a manuscript, such as one made of parchment, that has been washed off and erased for repeated use, but after each cleaning, glimpses of words through ink and impressions from writing instruments stay behind. Layers of words and ideas form on top of each other, never clean from the stories that had previously been written there. Even if the old stories on a palimpsest can no longer be made sense of, the past is never fully erased and obscures any reading of the present. Going to the Indian Wells Tennis Center in 2015 to work as a freelance tennis photographer and reporter, I only had a contradictory knowledge of what happened there fourteen years earlier. While I had read Serena and Richard Williams' accounts of the 2001 tournament in their autobiographies, published in 2009 and 2014 respectively, I had also read dozens of mainstream publications' online archives that told a different story. The conversations fans had amongst themselves and the words of smaller independent presses from 2001 are not archived on easily accessible online databases the way fan blogs and comment sections as we know them today can capture a moment for posterity. Getting to one Truth of what happened in that desert stadium that night in 2001 by reading through my archive of metaphorical palimpsests, with many texts published after the fact and changing the story a little each time, is not only impossible, but also it is irrelevant to my argument. Whether or not Venus Williams was too injured to play or what specific words were used to hurt Serena Williams at the next match has no bearing on my analysis of the various narratives that emerged from that tournament and how these were shaped by colorblind racism.

The mainstream media played an active role in shaping the narrative for an audience that may have a casual interest in tennis, passively taking in media narratives but not actively seeking more information; this includes articles from major publications like *The*

New York Times and *Sports Illustrated* that are easily found online and are representative of these portrayals. Another archive that is available to me today is the original press conference transcripts, which are all available for free online, posted by ASAP Sports, the company contracted to transcribe them. They are a record of what Williams said to reporters at that time, what questions they asked her, and through further analysis reveal the sort of editorializing that the press did before spinning the narrative that would end up in print. Although the transcripts were published online immediately following every press conference, they are difficult for people without knowledge of media procedures to find—not to mention that only 50.4% of households in 2001 had an internet connection.³⁵⁶ Entering the Tennis Center in March of 2015, I could easily access the initial media reports from 2001, what was said in official press conferences, and what the Williams family published years later. In the tensions between these three different information streams, I argue that racism impacted how stories were told to the detriment of young Serena Williams' reputation and to bolster racist projections onto her family, all while being careful not to mention race or racism.

Following the announcement that her sister would drop out of the tournament, Serena Williams gave a brief press conference. The reporters repeatedly asked about allegations of match fixing and the father's role in deciding the outcome while Williams repeatedly rebuffed, suggesting they should ask the sources they are hearing these rumors from. With only the written transcript available fully, the tone is difficult to assess/ At one point, a reporter asked a series of questions finally ending with "Don't you think we think there's some truth to it or don't you care?" A clearly exasperated Williams, having

³⁵⁶ File and Ryan, "Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2013."

answered the same question finally just replied: “I’ll pass since I don’t think you were very polite to me.” Doing this, she asserts her power as a player, to decide at least in that moment what story is being told. When sister Venus Williams held a conference just after Serena’s, she only faced one question about match fixing rumors and specifics about when she announced her withdrawal, to which she did say “it was very close” before the scheduled start. Mostly, the press asked her questions related to the knee injury, treatments she would receive, and how recovery would affect the rest of the season. The questions read as standard sports beat questions and signal that her injury is real in contrast with the interrogation that Serena Williams faced about match fixing.

At a press conference that evening, a reporter asked Venus Williams to respond to the rumors, to which she responded “everyone has their own opinion. [...] The rumors are more exciting than the truth.” Serena Williams countered that if their father decided matches, “then maybe Venus wouldn’t be up 4-1, maybe it would be three-all by now,” suggesting he would have them win an equal number of matches in their head-to-head.³⁵⁷ In a column for the *Los Angeles Times* that Friday, Bill Dwyre fueled the flames when he wrote, “if all [these allegations are] just the product of a bunch of jealous competitors on the women’s tour and a bunch of dopes with overactive curiosity glands, then why don’t the Williamses set the record straight? When they are asked about the rumor and innuendo that constantly swirl around them, they respond with smirks and half-hearted denials.”³⁵⁸ The observation glosses over the way that growing up Black in America might have taught the Williams Sisters that their words in self-defense will not be respected, taken seriously, or

³⁵⁷ Drucker, “The Story Behind the Williamses and Indian Wells.”

³⁵⁸ Drucker.

deemed true in such a way that would ever settle the matter in the eyes of the mainstream press and audiences. Dwyre could not possibly believe that calling their competitors liars and tennis fans dopes for believing it would put the Williams Sisters into a better position than smirks and denials.

In the colorblind logic, whereby naming racism becomes a problem in and of itself, Williams may have been chided for even suggesting race as a consideration in how she is perceived. After winning the Finals match against Clijsters, Serena Williams returned to the press room, this time facing questions from a mainly white press corps about how the “boos” impacted her and if she may have felt “annoyed,” and then returned to match-fixing allegations that had evidently just been printed in the *National Enquirer*. Refusing to dignify that question with a direct denial, Williams said “next thing you know I’m going to be pregnant by some Martian.” Not mentioning racism as a potential factor in how the sisters are treated or received negatively, a reporter asked, “do you think part of the problem is maybe because you have a sister on the road, that you guys stay together and don’t really mix with the other players as much, maybe they feel you’re apart from them?” to which Williams responds that she does feel they are apart and suggests it may be because of their success. Sumi Cho’s observed that “critiques of racism are rendered morally equivalent to racism itself” and the full burden of proof that a White person was acting in racist ways is placed on the person of color making the allegations.³⁵⁹ Unless race is specifically named by the offender as motivation, myriad stereotypes and coded words may serve as stand-ins that fail to meet the burden of proof of racism in the court of public opinion.

³⁵⁹ Cho, “Post-Racialism,” 1614.

A few moments later, a reporter did directly ask this as a follow up to another's question about the boos and hostility: "Do you think race has anything to do with this?"

S. Williams: Race? I think, you know, black people have been out of slavery for now just over a hundred years, and people are still kind of struggling a little bit. It hasn't been that long. I don't know if race has anything to do with this particular situation. But in general I think, yeah, there's still a little problem with racism in America.

In a balancing act between her honest opinion that this may well have to do with racism and that slavery has an enduring legacy that impacts present day structural racism, Williams does not directly call this crowd racist, something that could have created public relations problems for her and sponsors. Since a moral equivalency is set in colorblind post-raciality that accusing someone of racism without irrefutable and un-spinnable evidence, Williams would risk a PR spin on par with being a public racist herself if she were to accuse a white person of racism. The transcripts reveal that rather than engage in this topic any further, the way a dozen questions dealt with match-fixing allegations, the next reporter quickly shifts the conversation to a completely different topic, white Belgian opponent Kim Clijsters.

Regardless of how all the players presented themselves and the situations in the press conferences, the media crafted the circumstances to fit the narrative of an unforgiving Black woman isolated from the rest of the tour. When Clijsters sat at the conference table in that press room a few minutes later, a reporter asked if she felt "cheated" by being caught up in the controversy and having to play over the boos. Clijsters did not play into a discourse of white victimhood, but rather pointed out that it must have been much harder for Serena Williams, who was targeted by the jeers. Clijsters repeatedly mentioned how nice Williams is in person. In a show of solidarity that did not get mentioned in subsequent news articles, Clijsters reiterated that it is any player's right to withdraw from a match with injury at any point, whether minutes before if they twist an ankle during warm up or late in a third set, it

is the player's right and responsibility to prioritize their health at any point. She called a question of whether or not players have the right silly and said "If you can't play like a hundred percent in your next match, you shouldn't play, I think."³⁶⁰

To show how this narrative about Serena Williams was crafted, I compare three pieces published in the *New York Times*. I deliberately chose a publication that is not tennis or sports specific because the Williams Sisters are and were public figures far beyond the court and the *Times* captures this well with more elaborate tennis coverage than its counterparts.

Reporting for the *New York Times*, Selena Roberts described the crowd that jeered Serena Williams simply as "surly," with no acknowledgment of racism even as an unsubstantiated allegation.³⁶¹ The article, the same one that was sure to state Venus Williams was not visibly injured and that Richard Williams has a history of lying, only briefly quotes Serena Williams herself, in the form of an exasperated question: "How many people do you know who would go out and jeer a 19-year-old? Come on, I'm just a kid." Describing her on-court demeanor, the report says she "was visibly flustered by her role as the villain, even though she was not the sister who pulled out of the semifinal." "Flustered" downplays the horrid emotions the player herself describes experiencing and suggests that one of the sisters is in fact a villain. Describing Richard Williams' experience of that match, the *Times* reported that he called for security to be posted by the family seats but assures readers: "There was no incident, though. The abuse landed in verbal blows. Richard William' prematch fist shake was his only reaction" as to suggest that he was the threat to be

³⁶⁰ Clijsters, Indian Wells Press Conference.

³⁶¹ Roberts, "Serena Williams Wins As the Boos Pour Down."

managed. The article adds, “when a reporter approached him afterward, he motioned for security. The father sought protection, but his daughter Serena had found redemption.” The precise nature of the redemption Serena Williams supposedly found was left open but suggests redemption from her sister’s bad behavior through winning the final match.

Just a few days later, Harvey Araton, a white columnist, wrote an opinion piece of the *Times* titled “Williamses Should Take High Road.” Araton quotes Andre Agassi, noted nineties bad-boy of the sport, who also played the tournament that year: “Make assessments and judgments on how you want things to go in the future, and realize that those things are in your control. I would just consider it an opportunity to understand what people come to expect when we're out there playing the way we play, making the money we make, and you've got to be responsible and accountable for yourself.”³⁶² Adding an element of sexism, Araton compares the late announcement of Venus Williams’ withdrawal from the semifinal to standing up a date instead of calling to cancel, and concludes that “The booing was less for the act than it was for the attitude, and in many ways it was not unfair.” Not once does the piece refer to any potential for racially motivated aggression from the fans. The crowd that jeered the nineteen-year-old girl is portrayed as the jilted boy, and the girl is the responsible party who refuses to acknowledge any wrong doing. The family is expected to look inside themselves to see what they did to offend the White audience, who in this scenario could not possibly be the villains.

Following Araton’s article, Selena Roberts wrote another piece about Venus and Serena Williams. This time it was about a sponsorship deal the sisters signed with Wrigley’s chewing gum. Describing a conference call announcing the contract to press, Roberts refers

³⁶² Araton, “Sports of The Times; Williamses Should Take High Ground.”

to the events at Indian Wells saying, “The moderator cut off questions about last weekend’s controversy—Venus Williams withdrew shortly before her semifinal against her sister, citing a knee injury—although Venus Williams made a passing reference to it.” Roberts does not say what Venus had to say about the “controversy,” but judging by the Williams family’s account of the events, it is hard to imagine they saw the knee injury as the controversy and likely had focused on the horrible racist language they faced. Repeating the unverified allegations printed in her first article, Roberts reminds readers that “The move reignited long-held suspicions by some players that matches between Venus and Serena are fixed by their father, Richard. Venus’s exit also continued a pattern by the sisters, who often withdraw from tour events.” With no apparent sense of irony, Roberts does quote the older sister saying, “I want to say to all our fans not to believe everything you read.” The article, which jumps around between the conference call, old rumors about the sisters, and the preceding week’s events finally returns to the point of departure: a sponsorship deal with Wrigley’s:

“In the past, the company had used twins to represent the gum. Now, Wrigley’s marketing department is more interested in the urban and African-American consumers that the sisters can help them reach when commercials begin airing this summer. ‘This will be a multicultural campaign,’ said Rory Finlay, the senior director of consumer marketing for Wrigley. ‘But we’re really targeting what we’re calling urban individualists. ‘These are people who want to do things differently, stand apart from the crowd, be true to themselves.’”³⁶³

Against a backdrop of being subjected to racist abuses, the Williams sisters’ viability to sell product is celebrated, and with a clear reminder that they “stand apart from the crowd.” Touting a rhetoric of multicultural celebration of difference, Finlay makes clear that the sisters are being used to sell chewing gum to Black consumers, using the words “urban and

³⁶³ Roberts, “Controversy Can’t Dim Williamses’ Appeal.”

African-American” to describe the sought-after demographic. The article silos the sisters’ apparent appeal to Black markets, while reminding a largely white audience of the controversy.

These three articles appearing in the *New York Times* over the course of a week following Indian Wells provide just one example of the way popular media portrayed the events as a controversy. True to epistemologies of white ignorance, a reader could have closely followed the story in the media without ever hearing the word “racism” as part of the story but being reminded at several turns that the family was repeatedly accused of match fixing and withdrawing with fake injuries. The sisters’ value as marketable players was retained, but specifically as marketing to “urban individualists.” True to neoliberal post-racial rhetoric, the only point at which any of this coverage refers to race or ethnicity explicitly is to celebrate multiculturalism in corporate American marketing strategy. Paying lip service to propriety in journalism, the reporters quote members of the Williams family, but only in short phrases that affirm the narrative of a blown-out controversy about match fixing. The limitations of media in 2001 made it difficult for Williams to reach a large audience quickly on her own terms. Press releases are given to journalists who then meet with editors to decide what is noteworthy and official press conferences are limited to credentialed press from news outlets with high revenues and circulation numbers that want to stay on good terms with tour officials to ensure future access. On the rare occasion that a reporter goes rogue and writes a narrative that counters the official messaging, like *Washington Post* freelancer Michael Mewshaw did to detail official knowledge of sexual abuse of players by coaches in 1993’s *Ladies of the Court*, they are quickly blacklisted from

the international tennis circuit, banned from attending any professional event and talking to the players contracted by the organization.³⁶⁴

Serena Williams did not share her full experience of racism at Indian Wells 2001 before 2009, at which point she had gained significantly more sway in the press and with the tour. In her autobiography *On the Line* she details an entirely different story than what the news archives reveal. Williams explains that her sister told tournament officials early in the day that she was injured and wanted to withdraw, but they kept delaying the public announcement while trying to change her mind. While “[Venus] felt strongly she couldn’t play. She knew her body” the official trainer and tournament director apparently thought they knew her body better and “kept telling her to hold off on making any kind of final decision.”³⁶⁵ Serena Williams wrote that “I look back now and think maybe I should have said something, done something. But I was even younger and less established than Venus.”³⁶⁶ Already frustrated that she could not help her sister before the announcement that set all the events off was made, Serena Williams describes feeling pain and anger as the events continued to unfold while she was funneled through the tournament system with little opportunity to assert herself at any point. She expressed frustration with the reporters whom she told that Venus Williams had in fact made a timely decision: “Nobody looked at what actually happened. People were only too happy to cast us as the scapegoats, when really we were just victims of a stupid system and abuse of authority.”³⁶⁷

³⁶⁴ Mewshaw, *Ladies of the Court*.

³⁶⁵ Williams and Paisner, *On the Line*, 65.

³⁶⁶ Williams and Paisner, 66.

³⁶⁷ Williams and Paisner, 67.

Williams describes stepping onto the court to face Clijsters in the final and hearing boos. At first she thought something else was going on to upset the audience but then: “There was no mistaking that all of this was meant for me. I heard the word n***** a couple times, and I knew. I couldn’t believe it. That’s just not something you hear in polite society, but I was a long way from polite society on that stadium court.”³⁶⁸ The angry mob assembled in that 15,000 seat stadium yelling racist slurs at a teenager, as told by that person herself, evokes a horrible and unimaginable sense of dread, fear, and frustration she must have felt over the course of the next hours. The affect is completely lost in the casual *New York Times* articles of a surly crowd. The country club politeness associated with the sport, ruptured when the White fans were denied a competitive performance between two Black women they felt entitled to, moreover, it was that one of the women asserted her bodily autonomy and made a decision for herself against the desires of the tournament trainer and director.

Still boycotting the tournament at the time she published her memoir, Serena Williams wrote, “if I go back to Indian Wells I’ll send the wrong message to little black girls... if I don’t make my small stand on this, it will be harder for them to make their small stands when they come up.”³⁶⁹ In response to tour organizers who badgered her to return every year, she framed her refusal as a critique of colorblindness. “The most amazing thing is that they keep asking, like it never happened. But you don’t get past racial tension by forgetting about it. You don’t just ignore this kind of prejudice and hope it goes away.”³⁷⁰

³⁶⁸ Williams and Paisner, 71.

³⁶⁹ Williams and Paisner, 82–83.

³⁷⁰ Williams and Paisner, 83.

Her annual absence from the tournament bracket, a notable one as the tour's star player even ahead of Venus, was a loud reminder of the events that unfolded in 2001 and the media's misrepresentation of them in the service of colorblind post-raciality. The palimpsest of a tour schedule, the Williams' names missing from the Indian Wells draw as it was rewritten every year, showed remnants of an overtly racist legacy through all attempts by tennis officials to erase it.

One Step Forward, One Step Back: From Denying Racism in 2001 to Celebrating Its Demise in 2015

In announcing her return to 2015 return to Indian Wells in a *Time Magazine*, Serena Williams crafted her own primary message for other media to respond to. With the backing of a major print publication, but on the terms she could set as a star player, she was able to share her truth with a mainstream audience. Writing that “the undercurrent of racism was painful, confusing, and unfair” she forced the hand of journalists writing about her return to confront the subject of racism. Using the word “forgiveness” to describe the impetus for her return, she subtly reminds of her power within the tennis community to be the one forgiving transgressions, while also making clear that what happened was the Indian Wells community's responsibility.³⁷¹ Just days after the op-ed's publication, Williams took a more political position on her social media when she offered tickets to her matches as a prize to raise money for the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), an anti-racist organization. While the mainstream media got the subtle and forgiving Serena Williams in *Time Magazine*, her fans got the political agent re-signifying her return as a way to help those facing state violence in

³⁷¹ Williams, “Serena Williams.”

the criminal justice system served by EJI, mostly Black men and boys. This was an especially powerful moment for Williams to act, since #BlackLivesMatter was bringing a massive increase in attention to state violence in the wake of the murders of Mike Brown in Ferguson and Eric Garner in Staten Island, to name just a couple.

While Williams did talk about forgiveness in her op-ed for *Time Magazine*, satisfying the White liberals' drive to resolution, she continued to raise funds for the Equal Justice Initiative on her social media accounts that most of the older tennis fans were hardly monitoring closely. The fundraising site included a video of her talking over footage of Black men and boys in police custody. The information was available, but it got few mentions in the press and certainly not with an analysis that she was actively using her return to fight structural racism by raising money for people stuck in the legal system and not just expecting her return to cure racism on its own, the way some media perplexingly seemed to think it would. Trying to control the narrative, a *New York Times* reporter explained that he requested an interview with her, but an agent declined saying, "she wanted her first-person piece and her video to stand on their own now."³⁷² In terms of multi-channel self-branding, she used her power in the spotlight to direct the traditional media to her own branded media that she carefully developed, shutting down all channels of news information about her brand. This functioned as a sort of reverse press embargo, giving media nothing else to write about, knowing that she was in a position that audience demands compelled the press to report on her.

Once the tournament started, Williams had little interest in talking about 2001. Asked if she felt like she had "anything to apologize for" she brushed off the clearly rude

³⁷² Clarey, "After a 14-Year Boycott, Serena Williams Plans to Play at Indian Wells."

question reminding the reporter that she was just a teenager who acted professionally throughout, not taking the bait to give an answer that could be spun as anger. Following many questions about how she decided to return to Indian Wells, a reporter for *ESPN* asked her to talk about EJI and “how much of coming back here was trying to spread that message.” In one of the longest responses she gave that night, she said “I think a lot of the things that have been happening lately I think definitely played a part in the whole picture [...] Seeing the work that [Byron Stevenson of EJI] has been doing terms of the Equal Justice Initiative, in terms of getting the right representation for many, many minorities and for the prison system I though was a perfect opportunity to spread the word and try to help others in different situations.”³⁷³ While white journalist Bill Simons suggested her return would be the fix to racism, in the article that the tournament widely distributed to the press, Williams clearly acknowledges that racism has a much larger impact and structural mechanisms than he recognizes.

Williams sees that she can leverage her power as a top athlete to bring resources to people who need them. She used her position to include a message of prison reform activism and racial justice into the narrative of her “forgiveness.” As a safeguard in case the media would not run her vision of the story, she was able to include it in her op-ed and on her social media accounts. While the tournament officials attempted to direct press to see a story of forgiveness, Williams’ own words indisputably recorded that forgiving for past racism was only a small part of how she saw the story. Whereas in 2001 she could say whatever she wanted to at press conferences and the media would have editorial decisions in what the public would get to see, social media have given Williams channels to edit her own

³⁷³ Williams, BNP Paribas Open Press Conference, March 12, 2015.

message. Many Americans do prefer to believe racism is purely a thing of the past, they have to willfully ignore messages in a stronger way than fourteen years ago. A fan in 2001 could have held the sincere fiction that there was no concrete case of racism at the 2001 tournament, since all of the easily accessible information channels refused to mention it and held back details about the timing of Venus Williams' withdrawal. The *New York Times* printed repeated allegations of match-fixing without any evidence, while suggesting to their readers that it may be a reasonable allegation.

Following a tearful standing ovation as Serena Williams entered the stadium on her first day of tournament play in 2015, Bill Gates and Larry Ellison in the audience to cheer for her, the first match went quite smoothly in her favor. At the press conference that night, she said it was one of the “proudest moments in her career.” Refusing a reporter’s suggestion that this “erased” a bad memory, she conceded instead that this would be a new chapter. Various asked about it being an exorcism of old demons or a scab healing off, she refused a post-racial ideology. While not speaking of race directly, she did not say that this positive experience in any way compensated for the earlier injustice. Press conferences following later matches quickly returned to a regular tennis beat, asking about how the balls were bouncing, if the desert sun heat privileged night match players in the draw, and how her serves were going that week. The press ceased to ask questions about her prior experience on-site, and she ceased to bring it up, defaulting back to the mundane colorblind business of playing tennis after the dust settled.

When Serena announced her 2015 withdrawal from the semi-final with a knee injury, she did so on Instagram. Given the abuse she and her sister faced for the timing of the announcement of the 2001 announcement, when the sisters claimed the tournament knew already, announcing in such a public forum made sense. She avoided the usual process of

going through the tournament director and trainer, and instead saw her own doctor off-site for an evaluation and treatment. Curiously, she did make the announcement well after her match was scheduled. As the press assembled on the media balcony to watch the on-court announcement she would give, to see how she, the emcee, and the audience would receive it, we speculated about what was really happening. A young Black blogger joked around that he applauded her for the playing the long game to get this grandiose revenge against the tournament that wronged her, a white blogger said without any apparent judgement that she likely dropped out to have extra recovery time before the Miami tournament the next week, a frowned upon but not uncommon practice. In the press conference that followed her on-court announcement, the mood was congratulatory and relieved. Williams joked around and made faces throughout. Asking about the injury, press never stated any suggestion that she may have planned it. Asked what she made of the “cruel irony” that the tournament would end this way, she said “I don’t make anything of it” and deflected other questions of that nature.³⁷⁴ The *New York Times* reported “This Time, Serena Williams Is Cheered as She Leaves Indian Wells.”³⁷⁵ *Sports Illustrated* kept it neutral announcing “Serena Williams withdraws from Indian Wells with right knee injury.”³⁷⁶ Even *Rolling Stone* reported on it saying, “Serena Williams Wins at Indian Wells—Without Playing in the Final.”³⁷⁷ The publications came full circle with their colorblindness, sharing a positive representation of Williams, but evacuating it of Blackness and politics.

³⁷⁴ Williams, BNP Paribas Open Press Conference, March 20, 2015.

³⁷⁵ Rothenberg, “This Time, Serena Williams Is Cheered as She Leaves Indian Wells.”

³⁷⁶ Nguyen, “Serena Williams Withdraws from Indian Wells with Knee Injury.”

Conclusion: Whimsical Yet Comprehensive

After six weeks of build-up, following fourteen years of tension every time someone mentioned Indian Wells to Williams, the event ended in two quick hours of statements and a press conference. The coverage that followed in the next days largely celebrated the whole affair as a win for post-raciality, triumphing ever so briefly over the colorblind mistakes of 2001. With all the new ways for fans looking into the tournament to get the information, it would have been hard to deny race as an issue in the past, and so colorblindness was overcome to acknowledge past wrongs in the service of contemporary post-raciality. The sincere fictions and epistemologies of white ignorance, in the face of much more available information to counter it, require a greater extent of ignorance and more willful determination not to know than ever before. While the mainstream media still push White liberal narratives with post-racial aspirations that place pressure on the likes of Serena Williams to be the driving force behind overcoming racism, she is countering and subverting their narratives to the extent that she promotes structural changes.

While the mainstream press had long positioned Serena Williams in racialized terms of aggression and deceit, raised by a Svengali father in the gang riddled Compton, her self-representations have forged a counter narrative. Making full use of media available to her, from the conventional *Time Magazine* to self-publishing platforms like Twitter and Instagram, the new Serena brand is equal parts professional athlete, elegant woman, and silly girl next door. Not unlike the 16-year-old Serena Williams of the *Tennis Monthly Recap* newsletter, the 39-year-old Serena Williams on social media today is “playful yet professional, whimsical yet comprehensive, fluffy yet substantive.”

³⁷⁷ Vallejo, “Serena Williams Wins Indian Wells, Without Playing the Final.”

In the time between being a rising star in 2001 to indisputably one of the greatest players ever to pick up a racquet, Serena Williams became a superaltern. The press was accountable to her narrative and brand. Her direct reach to mass audiences would plainly expose the insufficiency of any media that would attempt to remove race from the 2001 story in its 2015 recounting. Consolidating these stories and ideologies led to an odd reversal of colorblindness within post-raciality by acknowledging historical wrongs within a contemporary redemption narrative. Since 2015, Williams has slowed on the court somewhat, but her legacy of pushing the press and tournaments to be accountable to players and their priorities still looms large. This is perhaps most clear in her rival and heir apparent, Naomi Osaka, whose role in the future of tennis I discuss in the Conclusion.

Conclusion

All I Know for Sure Is That the Baselines Are 78 Feet Apart

When I moved from Germany to the US in 1999, accessing German language media was difficult. Video tapes my family brought with us were not compatible with US televisions and the local Blockbusters did not stock many options in my first language. There was one film that was reliably available though: *Run Lola Run*. The experimental thriller had just been released in the US. Many a homesick night of my tween years was spent at home re-watching the film that depicts alternate timelines in which the protagonist, Lola, has 20 minutes to bring her boyfriend 100,000 Deutschmarks to stop a crime boss from killing him. Each timeline has vastly different outcomes depending on minor decisions and chance events that happen in the minutes after she gets the call.

One quote made its mark on my impressionable adolescent mind: a bank security guard who acts as narrator says, “The ball is round, the game is 90 minutes long, everything else is theory.”³⁷⁸ The first two phrases are attributed to Sepp Herberger, who coached the German national soccer team to its 1954 World Cup victory. The axioms etched themselves into the German vernacular to mean that *fate can change on a dime* and *it isn't over till it's over*. The film's writers adding that “everything else is theory” plays with the metaphorical and literal meanings of the cliches. Everything not defined indisputably in the rulebooks, is theory. In other words, the rules of a sport act as a wireframe to prop up a quasi-simulation of the human experience under extreme but defined conditions where it can be observed and theorized.

³⁷⁸ Tykwer, *Run Lola Run*.

Since I began writing this dissertation, the COVID-19 pandemic forced tennis to distinguish between tradition and a bare truth of what the sport is. Wimbledon, the prestige of which was evoked throughout this manuscript, was cancelled for the first time since World War II.³⁷⁹ The points-based ranking system used to obscure pay inequality was suspended.³⁸⁰ Lines judges that catalyzed some of Serena Williams' most memorable on-court moments were replaced with high-speed cameras.³⁸¹ Rules went from policing loud grunts to policing a player's every on-site exhalation with strict face mask policies.³⁸² But, the baselines remained 78 feet apart. This has framed my dissertation since I wrote the prospectus has survived the tumult that called everything else into question. Much of my dissertation has been looking back to develop frameworks that make sense of the state of tennis at the time of writing. To identify the core contributions of my dissertation, I map these frameworks onto the future of the sport as it appears with the younger generation of elite players.

There may be no better place to begin thinking of the future of women's tennis than with Naomi Osaka. I was fortunate to meet her several times, as she grew from obscure player with potential to the highest paid woman athlete in history. With my academic focus on the top stars with established legacies, my interest in Osaka was as a fan of the sport and occasional beat reporter. There was an early sense that she might be great one day, but that in itself is not unique. Every season there is a new crop of designated rising stars; however, between injuries and burnout, many hyped players never reach the potential projected early

³⁷⁹ Fuller, "Wimbledon Cancelled Due to Coronavirus."

³⁸⁰ "WTA Announces Revised WTA Ranking System."

³⁸¹ Clarey, "Automated Line Calls Will Replace Human Judges at U.S. Open."

in their careers. Dozens of the “next Serena Williams” or the “new Maria Sharapova” came and went in my years watching the sport. Osaka was the one to break through the hyperbole and become a unique star in the constellation that makes up women’s elite tennis. In this conclusion, I read Osaka’s ascendance to elite tennis stardom over the course of the time I worked on this dissertation as evidence for my work’s endurance rather than obsolescence. Critical aspects of each preceding chapter can be mapped onto Osaka’s complex status as one of the sport’s greats, showing the potential for the approaches and frameworks I developed here to be re-imagined and re-applied to new contexts. Osaka has emerged as a nexus for global regimes of gender, race, and sexuality and a challenge to them.

The first time I saw Osaka play was at the fall 2017 Stanford tournament, which I attended to see Maria Sharapova’s return from the doping suspension. Osaka, then 19 years old, lost an unremarkable first round match to 212th ranked Caroline Dolehide. The next time I saw Osaka play was at Indian Wells the following spring; she entered the tournament with some buzz from making the fourth round of the Australian Open. Regardless of her recent success, all eyes were on Serena Williams, who was making her return from maternity leave. A dark horse in the tournament, free from the pressures of expectation and attention, Osaka went on to win 2018 Indian Wells Championship as her maiden title. New to the spotlight, she started her winner speech by saying, “hi, I’m Nao-, oh um never mind” as she realized that most people there would know who she was already—having just watched her play the final. Later that year, she beat Serena Williams in the final of the US Open. It was a controversial match that left Osaka in tears as she held up the trophy with

³⁸² Futterman and Rothenberg, “The U.S. Open Descends Into Pandemic Precaution Chaos.”

runner-up Williams comforting her.³⁸³ The last time I saw Osaka play was at the Porsche Grand Prix in Stuttgart in spring of 2019, at which point she had already backed up her US Open win with the Australian Open title and began to set herself apart from many other “next bests” in the sport. Far from the unsure teenager who introduced herself to a stadium full of tennis fans, she had grown into a cerebral player who was comfortable holding a microphone. So comfortable, in fact, that when she misunderstood a poorly worded question of mine as undue critique, she confidently admonished me at a press conference—after I clarified my question, we exchanged painfully awkward mutual apologies for the misunderstanding.

Osaka’s confident defense of her on court record was a remarkable pivot from the previous day when I asked her a question related to her off court life as a celebrity, which she laughed off saying, “I know you did not just refer to me as a ‘celebrity.’ I know you did not just do that.”³⁸⁴ There is no truth in what constitutes celebrity and she was unsure of claiming the identity. There are truths in her record though; when she thought I said she was having a bad year, she responded with certainty, “I don’t understand why people are saying I’m having a bad season if I won Australian Open right? Last year, I didn’t win Australian Open. Sure, I didn’t like win Indian Wells but I still thought I did pretty good there, in

³⁸³ Osaka won the first set. Early in the second set, umpire Carlos Ramos gave Williams a warning for coaching after her coach motioned with his hands. He subsequently gave her a conduct violation for smashing a racquet. The second violation cost Williams a point. It appeared she misunderstood that the first violation was not just a warning, and got into an argument with the umpire, demanding an apology and saying he would never call one of her matches again. She went on to call him a “thief” for taking a point away from her. Osaka did not engage in any of the confrontations. Williams called for higher officials to intervene, telling them the umpire would not treat men this way. In fact, Ramos is notoriously strict and has given point penalties to top men’s players under similar circumstances. Play resumed and Osaka won the match 6-2, 6-4. (Waldstein, “Serena Williams vs. Naomi Osaka.”)

³⁸⁴ Osaka, Porsche Tennis Grand Prix Press Conference, April 23, 2019.

Miami, and then I'm here now."³⁸⁵ Whereas her identity as celebrity might have been negotiable and she was uncertain how to navigate that question, she was entirely confident defending results that could not be questioned.

These contradictions, public displays of strength and vulnerability, are now a part of the Osaka brand and have become enmeshed in the representation of her complex racial and national identities. The player was born in the city Osaka to a Japanese mother and Haitian father; her family moved to New York when she was three years old.³⁸⁶ Although she has resided in the US most of her life and had dual citizenship, she always competed under the Japanese flag and surrendered her US citizenship when she turned 22, a condition of maintaining Japanese national tennis status.³⁸⁷ A 2021 Nissan ad captures her resistance to simple classifications. In the commercial, Osaka is featured in voiceover apparently describing both herself and the new Ariya as: "Athletic and intelligent. Laid back and dominant. Straightforward, complex, shy, and outspoken. Understated, underestimated. Bold and quiet. Powerful and calm."³⁸⁸ This is the woman who kept her composure through Serena Williams taking on an umpire in her first Grand Slam final and then cried at the trophy ceremony. This is the woman who laughed off being called a celebrity but stood her ground when she felt her performance was called into question.

As a multi-racial woman who came of age in the US and is one of Japan's biggest stars, she has frequently negotiated social constructions of race across her global audiences. For example, in 2019, noodle company Nissin featured a light-skinned anime version of her

³⁸⁵ Osaka, Porsche Tennis Grand Prix Press Conference, April 26, 2019.

³⁸⁶ "Profile."

³⁸⁷ Rich, "Will Naomi Osaka Pick Japanese Citizenship or American?"

in a commercial. American fans decried the ad as whitewashing. While Nissin issued an apology, Osaka described the incident as a missed opportunity to portray diversity in Japan but said she didn't "think they did it on purpose" and added a contracts stipulation that all future representations would have to be cleared through her.³⁸⁹ Mindful of her marketing power, she turned the tables later the same year. When Japanese comedians mocked her dark skin as sunburnt and needing bleach, she used it as an opportunity to plug her sponsor, tweeting "Little did they know, with Shiseido Anessa perfect UV sunscreen I never get sunburned."³⁹⁰ Navigating the murky waters of not offending fans or sponsors in either of her home countries, she explained in a 2020 interview that: "The issues of America don't really translate that well in Japan, so sometimes they do blackface and things like that, and it's a bit ignorant ... It's not really a hate thing."³⁹¹ Whereas there are simple truths to the technicalities of her citizenship and what passport she travels with, the meaning of her nationality and race are conditional; she takes account of others' nationality and commercial relationships when these become topics of public interest.

While the balancing act has nothing to do with her apparent heterosexual orientation, it mirrors the struggles faced by queer players. In Chapter 2, "Love Means Nothing" I discuss the ways that players in queer relationships carefully navigate their own identities in a global marketplace. The post-homo-globalist approach appeases liberal markets by validating LGB pride, but does so through a series of platitudes that are open to interpretation. To call something like blackface "a bit ignorant" while adding "it's not a hate

³⁸⁸ Osaka, "Bold and Quiet."

³⁸⁹ McDonald, "Naomi Osaka Appears Whitewashed in Ad Campaign for Sponsor Nissin Foods."

³⁹⁰ Staff, "Osaka Laughs off 'too Sunburned' Comment with Plug for Sponsor's Sunscreen."

thing” refuses to assert what it actually is—not to suggest that it is any one thing. American audiences can hear a calling out of Japanese racism while a Japanese audience may feel vindicated that they are not accused of racist hate. The lack of substance in Osaka’s claim allows for as much interpretation as saying “love is love.”

Osaka’s position in the global marketplace bears resemblance to Maria Sharapova, as both are superalterns born outside of and raised in the US and caught up in the complexities of representing multiple cultures, nationalities, and femininities to diverse audiences. In the logic of superaltern, Osaka’s actions as brand ambassador speak for the many brands who pay her to display their logo. The strength of her superaltern status, her ability to influence discourse and major entities she is in contract with, was solidified in a series of events in 2020. On August 17th, Forbes declared her the highest-paid female athlete in history with \$3.4 million earnings in prize money and an estimated \$34 million in endorsements.³⁹² Then, on August 26th, she broke from years of tennis tradition of evading a strong stance on controversial topics and forced the hand of other stakeholders when she spoke up for Black Lives Matter.

In the tradition of Serena Williams’ multi-channel self-branding discussed in Chapter 5, Naomi Osaka used Instagram to announce that she would not play her next scheduled match. She shared a statement with fans saying:

“As many of you are aware I was scheduled to play my semifinals match tomorrow. However, before I am an athlete, I am a black woman. And as a black woman I feel as though there are much more important matters at hand that need immediate attention, rather than watching me play tennis. I don’t expect anything drastic to happen with me not playing, but if I can get a conversation started in a majority white sport I consider that a step in the

³⁹¹ “Naomi Osaka Reflects on Challenges of Being Black and Japanese.”

³⁹² Badenhausen, “Highest-Paid Female Athletes 2020.”

right direction. Watching the continued genocide of Black people at the hand of the police is honestly making me sick to my stomach. I'm exhausted of having a new hashtag pop up every few days and I'm extremely tired of having this same conversation over and over again. When will it ever be enough? #JacobBlake, #BreonnaTaylor, #ElijahMcclain, #GeorgeFloyd”³⁹³

Whereas Venus and Serena Williams both withdrew from semi-final matches with injuries that gave them the right to withdraw without breaching the contract, Osaka's withdrawal dared the US Tennis Association, sponsors, and other players to stand with or against her on entirely social-political grounds or punish her for the breach. As Jehovah's Witnesses, the Williams sisters publicly distant themselves from any overt political statements. By contrast, Osaka's explicit naming of police genocide of Black Americans as the reason for her work stoppage did not allow for the same vague discussions of technicalities.

In response, the US Tennis Association, together with the WTA and ATP, suspended play for one day out of respect for the ongoing global protests against racism and police brutality. Domestic sports leagues, like the NBA, had already taken similar actions responding to player protests. The following day, Osaka's team provided a statement exclusively to a young Black freelance tennis reporter with British newspaper *The Guardian*. In it, Osaka thanked the sport's governing bodies and said that, “[after] lengthy consultation with the WTA and USTA, I have agreed at their request to play on Friday. They offered to postpone all matches until Friday and in my mind that brings more attention to the movement.”³⁹⁴ She continued her activism on a bigger stage at the US Open shortly after. Every time she walked onto center court at Arthur Ashe Stadium, she wore a Covid-prevention face mask with the name of a different Black American killed by state violence.

³⁹³ Osaka, “As Many of You Are Aware.”

³⁹⁴ Carayol, “Naomi Osaka Opts to Play Semi-Final after Thursday Postponement.”

The Sunday she won the tournament final, her boyfriend, Black American rapper Cordae, who had recently been arrested in Louisville at a Breonna Taylor protest, was one of the few people allowed in the near empty stadium in line with pandemic protocols.³⁹⁵ Global broadcasts picked up the image of him cheering her on wearing a “Defund the Police” t-shirt.³⁹⁶ Publicly, she was met exclusively with support from sponsors, other players, and tour organizers. She leveraged her power as a popular, famous player, who also has the tennis skills to reliably make it to the final rounds of tournaments, to push conventionally apolitical organizations like the WTA to act in support of Black lives. Broadcasters had no choice but to show the names of the Black Americans murdered by police if they wanted to show her walk-ons. She leveraged her superaltern power to make sports broadcasters worldwide explain to their audiences who Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, Ahmaud Arbery, Trayvon Martin, George Floyd, Philando Castile, and Tamir Rice were.

Osaka’s willingness to risk harm to her professional relationships was not lost on Billie Jean King, who penned a *Washington Post* Op-Ed thanking young athletes like her and expressing pride in their activism. She wrote, “During my professional career, athletes endured incredible pressure to measure our words and actions to avoid upsetting sponsors, affecting tours or otherwise rocking the boat.”³⁹⁷ Osaka’s decision to stop work and bring attention to racist police violence put her name next to King’s as great women activists in tennis who were willing to upset the status quo of politely vague politics. In Chapter 2, I explained describe the women’s tour as an assemblage. To repeat queer theorist Jasbir

³⁹⁵ Breonna Taylor was a Black woman living in Louisville, KY. She was murdered by police officers during a raid on her apartment. Opiel, Taylor, and Bogel-Burroughs, “What to Know About Breonna Taylor’s Death.”

³⁹⁶ McDonald, “Naomi Osaka Made Sure Black Lives Mattered at the US Open.”

Puar’s definition, this is a “series of dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks.”³⁹⁸ In critical moments, assemblages are reconstituted, the parts rearranged and reimagined, spatiotemporalities newly put in conversation with each other. Osaka’s protest reconstituted her relationship with previous generations of players and potentially pushed tennis into a new direction. As Sepp Herberger said, the ball is round and the game is 90 minutes—the ball can move in any direction at any point in the game. Her activism was a return to the spirit of the WTA’s Original Nine a week after landing the lucrative sponsor contracts their work made possible.

Reluctance to rock the boat was a tradition, but it is not a historical truth of tennis. Osaka’s actions are part of the progressive legacy that made it the highest earning sport for women. She has used the platform it gave her to advocate for social justice and force uncomfortable conversations around racial and national identity. Although individual chapters in this dissertation detail the experiences and representations of other players, from other generations, confronting different social conditions, the ways they map onto Osaka’s career show the potential of these frameworks to endure as an approach to analyze the sport regardless of which way the ball is rolling.

While the elite tennis players I analyze form a small, strange, and often insular community, their individual experiences and experiences as individuals represent aspects of quotidian social identities. In the Introduction to this manuscript, I quoted Roland Barthes: “What is it then that men put into sport? [...] Themselves, their human universe. Sport is

³⁹⁷ King, “Opinion | Billie Jean King.”

³⁹⁸ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 211.

made in order to speak the human contract.”³⁹⁹ This research was an exercise in listening to how tennis articulates the global intersections of gender, sexuality, and race as elements of the human contract. I wrote this dissertation as a guide to reading between the baselines, to interpret the past, present, and future of how women’s elite tennis speaks the human contract.

³⁹⁹ Barthes, *What Is Sport?*, 65.

Appendix

Appendix I: 2019 Point and Prize Money at Select US Joint Tournaments

	Indian Wells	Cincinnati	Washington	Combined
ATP Sanction	Masters 1000	Masters 1000	Masters 500	
WTA Sanction	Premier Mandatory	Premier 5	International	
ATP Points	1000	1000	500	2,500
WTA Points	1000	900	280	2,180
Difference	0	100	220	320
ATP Prize Money	\$1,354,010	\$1,114,225	\$365,390	\$2,833,625
WTA Prize Money	\$1,354,010	\$544,500	\$43,000	\$1,941,510
Difference	\$0	\$569,725	\$322,390	\$892,115
ATP \$ Per Point	\$1,354.01	\$1,114.23	\$730.78	\$1,133.45
WTA \$ Per Point	\$1,354.01	\$605.00	\$153.57	\$890.60
Difference	\$0	\$509.23	\$595.44	\$242.85

Appendix II: 2017 Participation of 2016 Year-End Top-30 Players

2016 Year-End top-30 Player participation and total prize money in 2017. Data compiled from ATP and WTA player profiles and media guides.

WTA

Rank End 2016	Name	Points End 2016	Grand Slams	1000	900	470	280	Prize Money End 2017
1	Angelique Kerber	9080	4	4	5	6	2	\$ 1,148,695.00
2	Serena Williams	7050	1				1	\$ 2,704,680.00
3	Agnieszka Radwanska	5600	4	3	4	5	2	\$ 909,379.00
4	Simona Halep	5228	4	4	5	2	2	\$ 4,627,957.00
5	Dominika Cibulkova	4875	4	4	5	8	1	\$ 897,689.00
6	Karolina Pliskova	4600	4	4	5	5	1	\$ 3,432,429.00
7	Garbiñe Muguruza	4236	4	4	5	7		\$ 5,079,898.00
8	Madison Keys	4137	3	3	3	2		\$ 2,289,757.00
9	Svetlana Kuznetsova	4115	4	4	4	5		\$ 1,963,653.00
10	Johanna Konta	3640	4	4	3	6	2	\$ 2,706,385.00
11	Petra Kvitova	3485	3	1	3	3	1	\$ 1,149,122.00
12	Carla Suarez Navarro	3070	4	4	4	4	7	\$ 877,091.00
13	Victoria Azarenka	3061	1				1	\$ 186,746.00
14	Elina Svitolina	2895	4	4	4	2	4	\$ 3,225,086.00
15	Timea Bacsinszky	2347	3	2	1	2	1	\$ 948,262.00

16	Elena Vesnina	2252	4	4	5	9	2	\$ 1,953,764.00
17	Venus Williams	2240	4	2	3	2	2	\$ 5,468,741.00
18	Roberta Vinci	2210	4	3	5	6	2	\$ 395,073.00
19	Caroline Wozniacki	2185	4	4	4	5	5	\$ 4,748,518.00
20	Barbora Strycova	2170	4	4	5	7	4	\$ 1,088,098.00
21	Samantha Stosur	2115	2	4	3	5	6	\$ 609,005.00
22	Kiki Bertens	1977	4	4	4	5	11	\$ 765,673.00
23	Caroline Garcia	1830	4	4	5	2	7	\$ 3,351,361.00
24	Shuai Zhang	1795	4	4	3	8	6	\$ 680,939.00
25	Daria Gavrilova	1665	4	4	4	8	3	\$ 877,218.00
26	Timea Babos	1635	4	3	3	6	11	\$ 467,771.00
27	Daria Kasatkina	1630	4	4	5	9		\$ 1,078,407.00
28	Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova	1620	4	4	5	7	5	\$ 1,294,429.00
29	Irina-Camelia Begu	1531	4	3	4	7	7	\$ 544,605.00
30	Ekaterina Makarova	1530	4	4	5	6	3	\$ 804,238.00
	Standard Deviation	1811.16	0.9	0.8	1.0	2.3	3.0	\$ 1,551,580.68
	Mean	3250.83	3.6	3.6	4.0	5.3	3.8	\$ 1,912,773.48
	Total	95804	109	100	114	149	99	56274669

ATP

Rank End 2016	Name	Points End 2016	Grand Slams	1000	500	250	Prize Money End 2017
1	Andy Murray	12410	3	4	3	1	\$ 2,071,625.00
2	Novak Djokovic	11780	3	4	1	2	\$ 2,083,742.00
3	Milos Raonic	5450	3	4	3	4	\$ 1,372,323.00
4	Stan Wawrinka	5315	3	5	2	2	\$ 2,802,229.00
5	Kei Nishikori	4905	3	5	3	3	\$ 1,435,597.00
6	Marin Cilic	3650	4	7	5	4	\$ 3,596,923.00
7	Gael Monfils	3625	4	3	3	4	\$ 1,003,855.00
8	Dominic Thiem	3415	4	9	8	5	\$ 3,653,909.00
9	Rafael Nadal	3300	4	9	3		\$ 12,691,341.00
10	Tomas Berdych	3060	1	2	1	2	\$ 557,310.00
11	David Goffin	2750	3	9	5	7	\$ 3,530,613.00
12	Jo-Wilfried Tsonga	2550	4	6	3	6	\$ 1,843,647.00
13	Nick Kyrgios	2460	4	6	4	3	\$ 1,771,025.00
14	Roberto Bautista Agut	2350	4	9	5	6	\$ 1,731,788.00
15	Lucas Pouille	2156	4	8	6	5	\$ 1,953,511.00

16	Roger Federer	2130	3	4	3	1	\$ 11,754,077.00
17	Grigor Dimitrov	2035	4	9	4	5	\$ 5,577,494.00
18	Richard Gasquet	1885	4	4	5	5	\$ 985,805.00
19	John Isner	1850	4	7	4	8	\$ 1,707,551.00
20	Ivo Karlovic	1795	4	5	2	9	\$ 653,609.00
21	David Ferrer	1785	4	6	5	7	\$ 1,046,695.00
22	Pablo Cuevas	1780	3	7	5	7	\$ 1,124,364.00
23	Jack Sock	1710	4	8	4	5	\$ 2,824,201.00
24	Alexander Zverev	1655	4	9	6	5	\$ 4,206,314.00
25	Gilles Simon	1585	4	6	6	9	\$ 666,046.00
26	Bernard Tomic	1465	4	4	5	8	\$ 474,873.00
27	Albert Ramos-Vinolas	1435	4	9	6	11	\$ 1,643,204.00
28	Feliciano Lopez	1410	4	9	6	6	\$ 1,303,087.00
29	Viktor Troicki	1385	4	8	5	11	\$ 880,741.00
30	Pablo Carreno Busta	1370	3	9	4	7	\$ 2,553,481.00
	Standard Deviation	2687.659	0.7	2.2	1.6	2.7	\$ 2,866,075.50
	Mean	3148.367	3.6	6.5	4.2	5.4	\$ 2,650,032.67
	Total	94451	108	194	125	158	\$ 79,500,980.00

Appendix III: Dollar per Point Analysis for Joint Tournaments

Data sourced from ATP, WTA, and individual tournament websites for the 2019 season.

All currencies adjusted to USD. Euros converted to USD at 1.24 exchange rate in accordance with WTA convention.

Of 19 joint tournaments, 7 pay men and women the same dollar amount per point earned.

The China Open in Beijing pays women 4% more per point won.

The remaining 11 joint events pay men between 21% and 400% more per point won.

Tournament	WTA Pts	WTA Winner	WTA \$/Pt	ATP Pts	ATP Winner	ATP \$/Pt	Diff \$/pt ATP-WTA	% Diff
Australian Open	2000	\$2,943,816	\$1,472	2000	\$2,943,816	\$1,472	\$0	0%

Roland Garros	2000	\$2,710,315	\$1,355	2000	\$2,710,315	\$1,355	\$0	0%
Wimbledon	2000	\$2,983,748	\$1,492	2000	\$2,983,748	\$1,492	\$0	0%
US Open	2000	\$3,850,000	\$1,925	2000	\$3,850,000	\$1,925	\$0	0%
Indian Wells	1000	\$1,354,010	\$1,354	1000	\$1,354,010	\$1,354	\$0	0%
Miami	1000	\$1,354,010	\$1,354	1000	\$1,354,010	\$1,354	\$0	0%
Madrid	1000	\$1,351,161	\$1,351	1000	\$1,351,161	\$1,351	\$0	0%
Beijing	1000	\$1,523,265	\$1,523	500	\$733,990	\$1,468	-\$55	-4%
Brisbane	900	\$188,280	\$209	250	\$90,990	\$364	\$155	74%
Rome	900	\$584,882	\$650	1000	\$1,069,658	\$1,070	\$420	65%
Cincinnati	900	\$544,500	\$605	1000	\$1,114,225	\$1,114	\$509	84%
Rogers Cup	900	\$521,530	\$579	1000	\$1,049,040	\$1,049	\$470	81%
Sydney	470	\$141,875	\$302	250	\$90,990	\$364	\$62	21%
Eastbourne	470	\$173,680	\$370	250	\$146,233	\$585	\$215	58%
Moscow	470	\$180,520	\$384	250	\$144,830	\$579	\$195	51%
Auckland	280	\$43,000	\$154	250	\$90,990	\$364	\$210	137%
Acapulco	280	\$43,000	\$154	500	\$321,290	\$643	\$489	318%
s-Hertogen.	280	\$43,000	\$154	250	\$136,828	\$547	\$394	256%
Washington	280	\$43,000	\$154	500	\$384,120	\$768	\$615	400%

Appendix IV: 2019 Year-End Top-10 Points and Prize Money

Rank	WTA Player	Points	Prize Money	ATP Player	Points	Prize Money
1	Barty	7,851	\$11,307,587.00	Nadal	9,985	\$16,349,586.00
2	Pliskova, Ka.	5,940	\$5,138,077.00	Djokovic	9,145	\$13,372,355.00
3	Osaka	5,496	\$6,788,282.00	Federer	6,590	\$8,716,975.00
4	Halep	5,462	\$6,962,442.00	Thiem	5,825	\$8,000,223.00
5	Andreescu	5,192	\$6,504,150.00	Medvedev	5,705	\$7,902,912.00
6	Svitolina	5,075	\$6,126,335.00	Tsitsipas	5,300	\$7,488,927.00
7	Kvitova	4,776	\$3,724,430.00	Zverev	3,345	\$4,280,635.00
8	Bencic	4,745	\$4,113,075.00	Berrettini	2,870	\$3,439,783.00
9	Bertens	4,245	\$4,208,026.00	Bautista Agut	2,540	\$2,911,522.00
10	Williams, S.	3,935	\$4,310,515.00	Monfils	2,530	\$2,916,587.00
Total	Women	52,717	\$59,182,919.00	Men	53,835	\$75,379,505.00

Appendix V: Statista Tennis Dossier

Figure 1. Source: Nielsen Scarborough via Statista

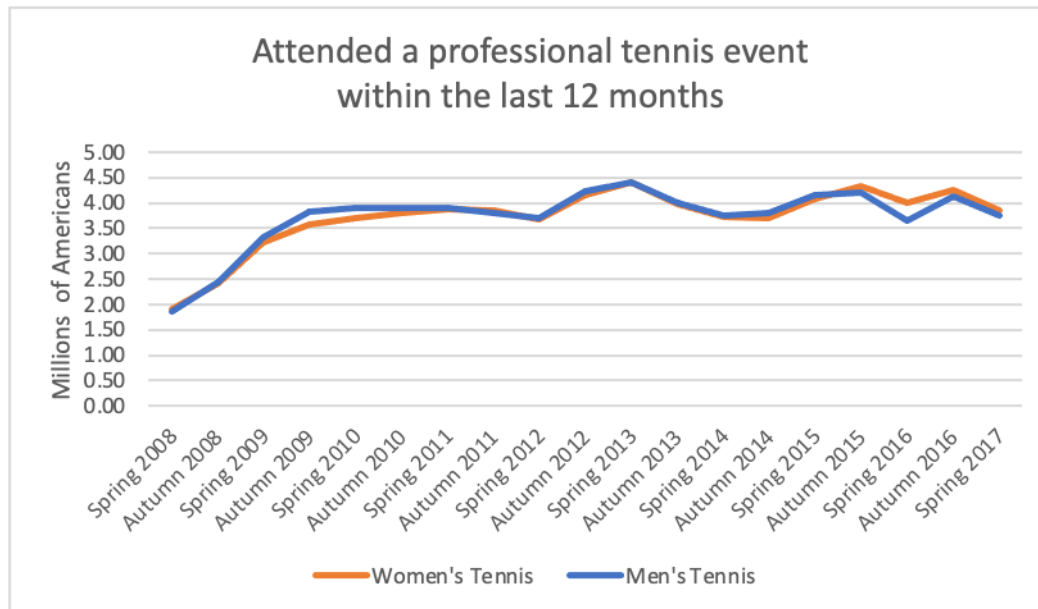


Figure 2. Source: Nielsen Scarborough via Statista

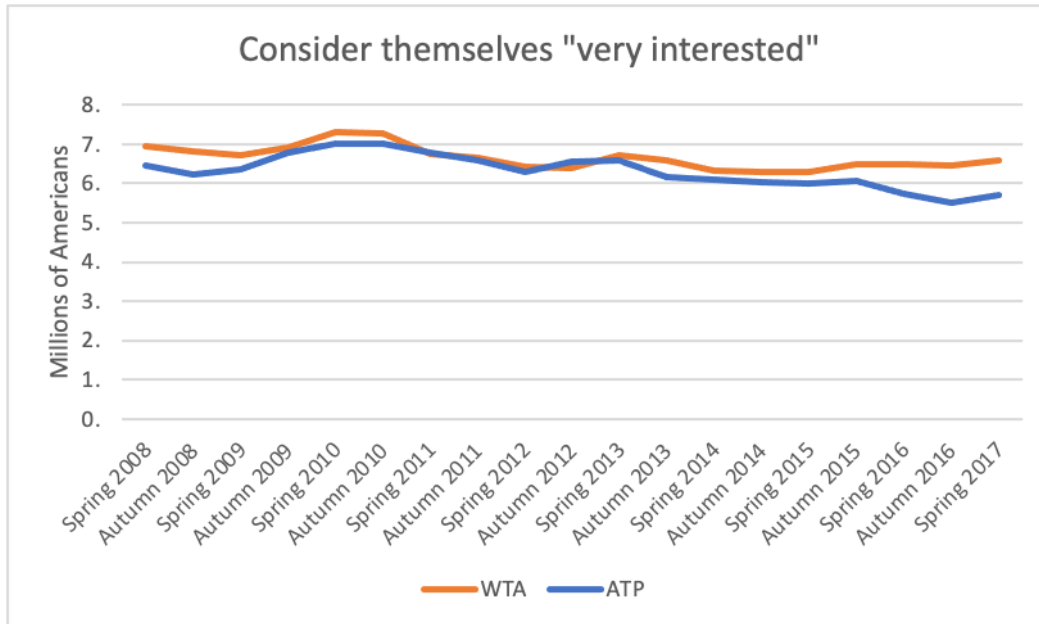


Figure 3. Source: ESPN.com; CBS; Showbuzz Daily; Awful Announcing via Statista

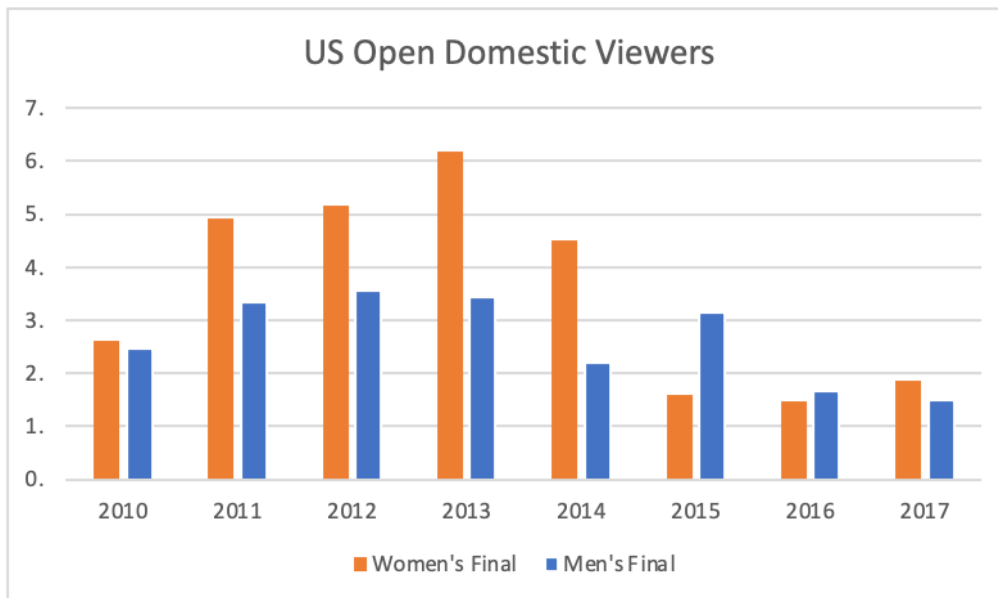
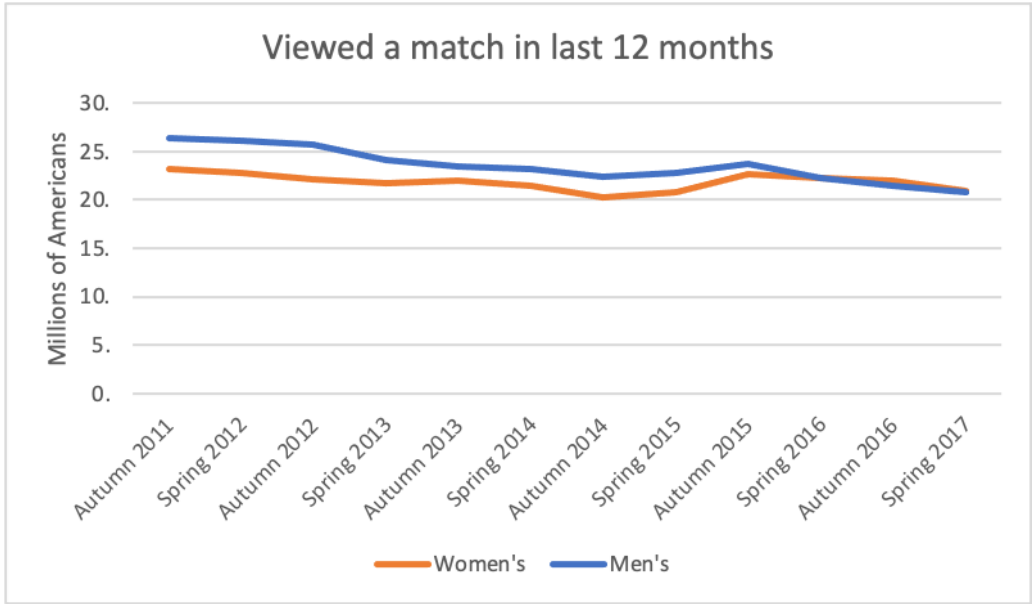


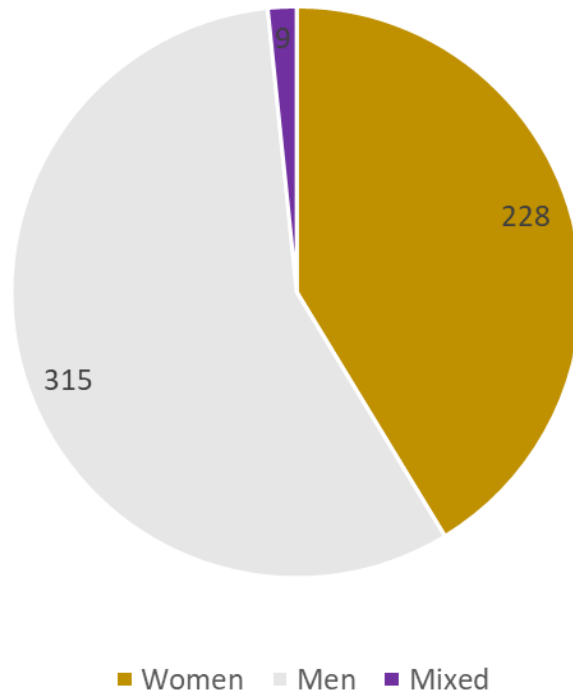
Figure 4. Source: Nielsen Scarborough via Statista



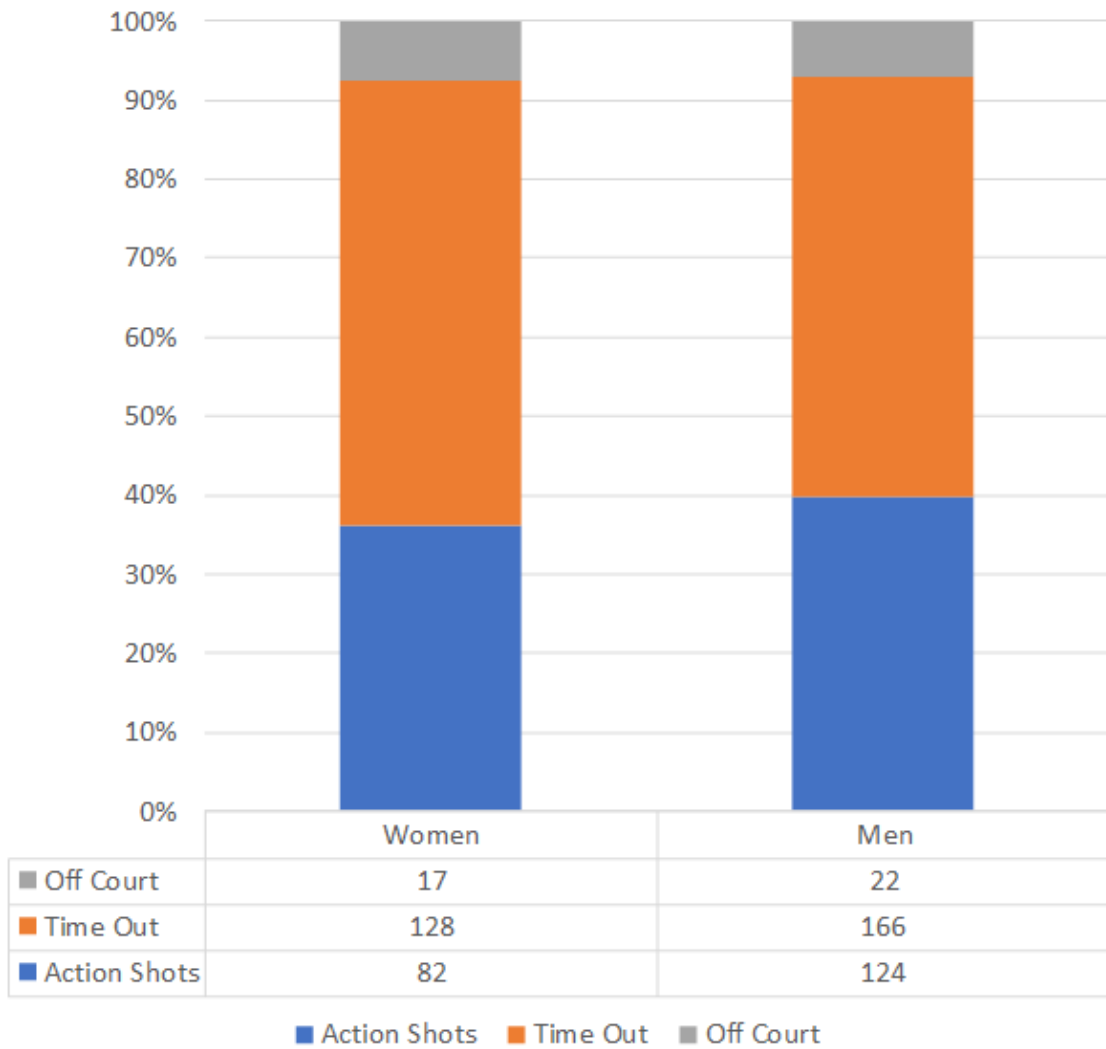
Appendix VI: Grand Slam social media analysis

Content of all Grand Slam official Instagram accounts during their respective tournament fortnights in 2017.

Players featured



Type of Photo

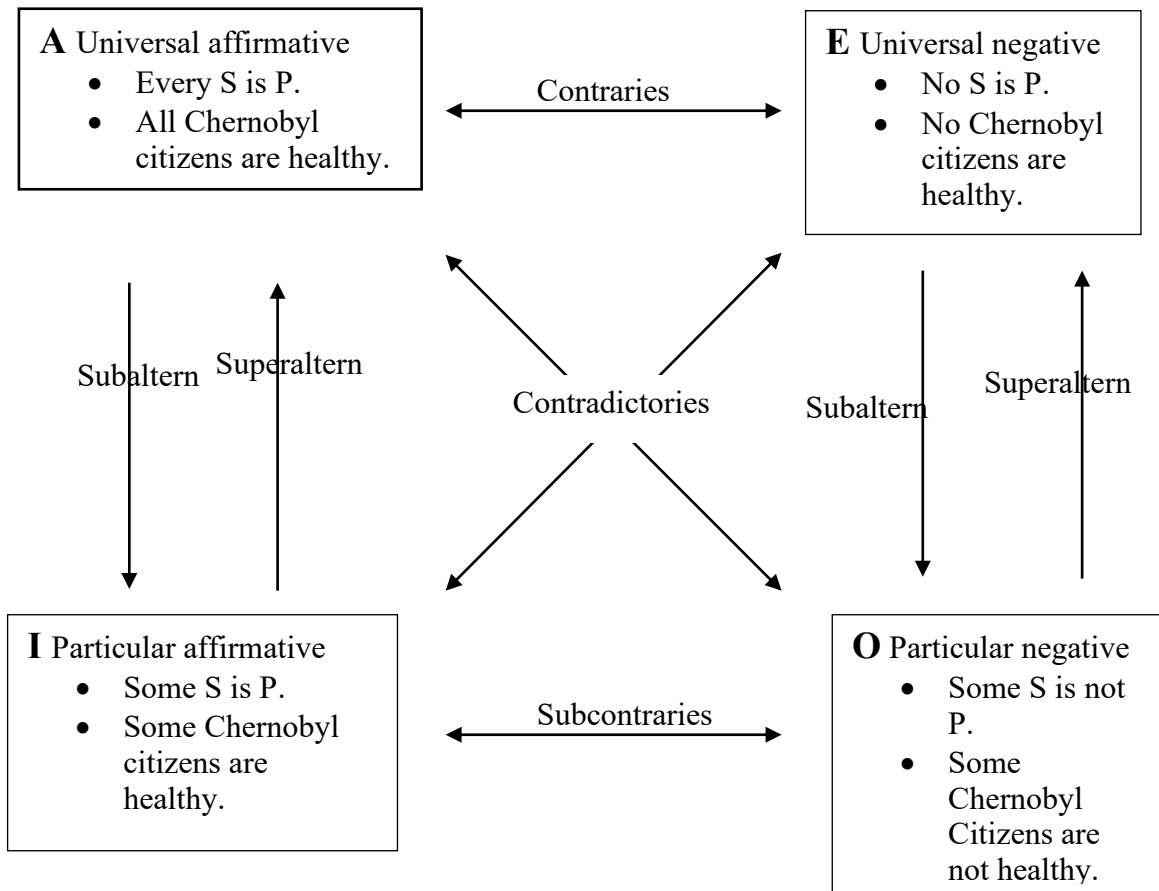


Off court refers to images where players are not wearing tennis wear.

Time out refers to images where players are on court, but not actively playing. This includes images such as players changing sides, getting water, or positioning themselves on court.

Action shots refers to images in which players are actively playing tennis.

Appendix VII: Square of Opposition



Definitions:

Superaltern: a universal proposition (such as “every S is P”) that in traditional logic is held to be grounds for the immediate inference of the truth of a corresponding subaltern (such as “some S is P”)⁴⁰⁰

⁴⁰⁰ “Superaltern | Definition of Superaltern by Merriam-Webster.”

Subaltern: Either of a pair of propositions consisting of a universal proposition and a particular proposition having the same subject and predicate and being of the same quality (i.e. affirmative or negative); spec. the particular proposition of such a pair⁴⁰¹

In this example, given the superaltern claim that all Chernobyl citizens are healthy, it follows that some are healthy. The superaltern universal affirmative renders the subaltern claim vacuous.

Given the universal negative claim that no Chernobyl citizens are healthy, the subaltern that some are not healthy can be inferred.

The superaltern claim subsumes its subaltern, making the subaltern pointless, vacuous, or moot.

⁴⁰¹ “Subaltern | Definition of Subaltern by Merriam-Webster.”

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