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8 Venus and Serena are 'doing it' for themselves

Theorizing sporting celebrity, class and Black feminism for the Hip-Hop generation

Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe

> The one thing that most of the Black women of the Hip-Hop generation have in common is that they all came of age in the post-Black power era . . . The head start made by earlier Black women has made claiming a space from which to speak somewhat easier; however, Black women today are still plagued with some of the same issues.
>
> Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture and the Public Sphere*

> Pro sports play two primary roles in our society: on the one hand, they are critical for the reinforcement of 'values' like discipline, hard work, and patriotic obeisance. On the other, they represent one of the United States' biggest global cash cows. Players like Michael Jordan [and the Williams Sisters] . . . have brought corporate values and profits together in one smiling red, white and blue package.
>
> Dave Zirin, *What's My Name Fool?: Sports and Resistance in the United States*

Introduction

Do you know where you were on 13 September 1996 and 9 March 1997? According to Kitwana (2002), these two dates, which respectively mark the gun-related deaths of former best friends turned rival West Coast/East Coast gangsta rappers Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, were defining socio-political moments for Black constituents of the American Hip-Hop generation[1] (HHG), which he earmarks as those born between 1965 and 1984. In fact, Kitwana suggests that the untimely demises of Shakur and Smalls are etched on the memories of the post-Civil Rights generation in much the same way as the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr resonate for their Civil Rights generation (CRG) forebears. Although both cohorts have their fallen male heroes, there is a perceived disjunction between the actual political achievements of the CRG and the imagined apolitical aspirations of the HHG.

Persistent academic and media emphases (Boyd, 2003; Chang, 2005; Lang, 2000) on this generational rift obscure three significant resonances. The first is that not all Black youth of the HHG have reaped the social, economic and political rewards of these earlier liberation struggles (Green, 2001; Kinshasa, 1997). Both the over-representation of young Black men in penal institutions rather than institutions of higher learning (Kitwana, 2002) and the increased criminalization of young Black women (Sudbury, 2002) point to the triumph of the prison industrial complex over affirmative action. The second is that, like polymorphous 'on-the ground' Hip-Hop culture as opposed to its monolith 'gangsta' popular/corporate renderings, grassroots HHG activism is not a contradiction in terms but rather manifests itself in myriad shapes and forms. In an interview with author/journalist Chang, long-standing HHG activist Angela Brown situates the 'lunch counter'[2] political strategies of the HHG in this current post-industrial, neo-liberal, digital age:

> 'The way in which they built their movement was around the "lunch counter" – SNCC [Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee] and others coming down to the South to challenge segregation on the "lunch counter" . . . We didn't have a single "lunch counter". We had many "lunch counters". Our fight has been a constant barrage of struggles.' [Chang adds:] No longer was there a single Movement, but dozens of movements – civil rights, education, environmental justice, AIDS, prisons, the list went on.
>
> (Chang, 2005: 451)

Finally, the hyper-visible yet still marginalized status of Black women and our counter-hegemonic resistance strategies are the sturdy bridges connecting the gendered contradictions of Hip-Hop politics to those inherent in earlier social movements (Collins, 2006). These links extend from the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s back to the cultural nationalist campaigns of the early twentieth century and beyond to the abolitionist and suffrage political projects of the nineteenth century:

> Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted its inroads upon them . . . and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways. There have always been Black women activists – some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E.W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown – who had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique. Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters.
>
> (Combahee River Collective, 1977/2000: 262)

Though the transformative potential of Black feminisms, celebrated by the Combahee River Collective over thirty years ago, has been sustained, Black feminisms' ideological limitations as they pertain to the construction of a unitary Black female political subject also persist (James, 1999).

In the American society within which the HHG evolves, the polarization of the 'Black community' along class, gender and sexuality fault-lines has only intensified (Cole and Guy-Sheftall, 2003; Neal, 2005; McBride, 2005; hooks, 2000; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; Kelley, 1997). These fissures widen in part as a result of proliferating multimedia technologies that manufacture, promote and export the ideologies of predatory capitalism by any patriarchal, imperial, heteronormative means necessary (Collins, 2004; Sharpley-Whiting, 2006). With generational undertones, the inclining presence of a Black middle/upper-middle class without the declining existence of a Black 'under-class' has reproduced what Dyson (2005: xiii–xiv) characterizes as an 'Afristocracy' and a 'ghettocracy', respectively. In the same breath, Dyson reminds us that 'class in black America has never been viewed in strictly literal economic terms; the black definition of class embraces style and behavior as well' (*ibid.*: xv).

Firmly situated within the specific socio-political milieu of Black America (as opposed to, for example, the United Kingdom, where there are different and perhaps less subtle class registers), it is these negotiated and contested meanings of class as both an economic and a symbolic (but always already gendered and racialized) category that my discussion will explore (Lawler, 2005; Aronowitz, 2003). Within such dialectical parameters, tennis super-star sisters Venus and Serena Williams (and other Black (women) celebrity performers) can and do simultaneously signify 'the ghetto' and 'the suburb' as two intersectional symbolic spaces where differential discourses on class and 'race' are (re)produced (Dyson, 2005; hooks, 2000). As such, any twenty-first-century conceptualization of Black feminisms must move beyond a totalizing narrative towards a more dynamic reconfiguration, which is heterogeneous in process and contradictory in nature (Phillips *et al.*, 2005). No cohort of Black women embodies these antagonisms and ambivalences more than the HHG (Collins, 2006; Pough, 2004; Morgan, 2005).

Against a political economic backdrop that highlights the differential structural positions of young Black women in the United States, the following discussion explores what has been retained from 'older' Black feminist praxis and traces the contours of a 'new' Hip-Hop Black feminist theory and practice. By analysing specific media constructions and representations of the tennis super-star sisters Venus and Serena Williams,[3] I illustrate the ways in which these sporting Black females both embody a new Hip-Hop Black feminist world-view and reproduce a gendered and racialized hegemonic social order predicated on the 'just do it' liberal political rhetoric of meritocracy and inclusion, which has been appropriated by (conservative) Republicans in the US. Utilizing fused Marxist, Cultural Studies and Black feminist analyses, this chapter situates these representational 'race', gender, generational and class politics beyond and within the arena of high-performance professional sport studies (Scraton, 2001; Birrell, 2000).[4]

While a deliberate reflection of my disciplinary moorings outside Sport Studies, this conceptual approach also facilitates my engagement with three entangled problematics, which in turn highlight the complexities and contradictions of global capitalism as a dual process of de-territorialized but racialized global commodification and territorialized local signification of specific historically situated, engendered and racialized power dynamics. Rather than questions in search of definitive answers, they (and the chapter in general) are intentionally polemical: first, what constitutes protest and complicity for the post-Civil Rights Hip-Hop feminist generation (Morgan, 1999; Springer, 2002; Chambers, 2003)? Second, invoking Priti Ramamurthy's (2003) theoretical formulation, what are the 'perplexities'[5] of the symbiotic relationship between transnational corporate patronage and global Black female sporting celebrity? Third, is the burden of talent and entitlement heavier for young, Black American and female sporting celebrities such as Venus and Serena Williams (Douglas, 2005; Schultz, 2005; Spencer, 2001)? That is, do they have an ethical as opposed to a charitable responsibility[6] to the economically disadvantaged and the politically disempowered, which include both working-class young African American women and the predominantly young female workforces in Caribbean and South East Asian sweatshops who produce the sporting commodities they endorse (Ross, 2004; Hapke, 2004)?

In addition to my critical engagement with literature across multiple (inter-) disciplinary fields, the raw materials for this chapter include a wide range of newspaper and magazine articles spanning the breadth of this sister-act's relatively brief sporting career, which I critically read as discursive texts. Interwoven with textual analyses are three theoretical threads, which collectively contribute to the shaping of a new Hip-Hop Black feminist praxis on the dialectics of young Black American female sporting celebrity. First, situating 'on the court' representations of Venus and Serena Williams as 'ghetto Cinderellas' within a Black feminist frame uncovers continuities in the 'changing same' depictions of resisting Black women as representations of deviant sexuality located outside the scope of Eurocentric standards of beauty and femininity (Ifekwunigwe, 2004b). Second, assessing the class politics of 'Black American Princesses' (BAPs), the 'off-the-court' (post-Civil Rights) persona I have fashioned for Venus and Serena, uncovers a shift towards an individual bourgeois (Chambers, 2003) rather than a collective socialist (Davis, 1989/2000) Black (American) female politics of empowerment. Third, by illustrating how high-performance Black sporting celebrities, such as the Williams sisters, collude with their transnational corporate patrons in the marketing of 'The American Dream' in both its Horatio Algier and Martin Luther King, Jr manifestations, I expose the very limited and over-determined ways in which Blackness is personified in the public sphere (Jackson, 2005). In other words, this chapter will interrogate the interface between 'real' Blackness and the 'authentic'/'sincere' (*ibid.*: 28) dimensions of athleticism, class consciousness and ethical responsibility, or what in colloquial terms is known as 'giving back'.

Black Venus strikes back: athleticism and 'changing same' representations of Black womanhood

There are different gendered, racialized, ethnic, class-based and cultural conceptions of sporting female bodies, which are the discursive products of specific knowledge systems and particular historical circumstances, such as plantation slavery (Douglas, 2002). In particular, sports journalism plays an important role in the manufacture of a racialized and sexualized sporting female aesthetic (Spencer, 2001; Rowe, 2004). In the tennis world, the differential media discourses on the 'super-feminine' Anna Kournikova and the 'transmasculine/she-male' Williams sisters presuppose a heterosexual White male gaze and erase the possibility of lesbian sport spectatorship while also paradoxically constructing muscular female athletes as the popular stereotype of a lesbian (Griffin, 2002; Collins, 2004). For example:

> no player has ever had Kournikova's impact, and the X-factor to supplement her abundant natural beauty. Exceptionally photo- and telegenic . . . her slight accent, her icy demeanor, the persistent whispers of alleged ties to the Russian Mafia, the bizarre love triangles, and the conga line of revolving suitors imbue her with a sense of mystery and a lightning bolt of eroticism . . . Kournikova knows how to play the crowd and enflame the boys.
>
> (Wertheim, 2002: 149)

Wertheim's depiction of Kournikova reinscribes a particular version of White European beauty which then becomes the yardstick for the measurement of Venus and Serena's heterosexual attractiveness (McDonald, 2005; Douglas, 2002; Scraton, 2001). For example:

> REHIRED: Radio reporter Sid Rosenberg, who was fired two weeks ago after saying on Don Imus' syndicated show that Venus Williams was an animal and that she and sister Serena had a better shot at posing nude for *National Geographic* than *Playboy*. He apologized and showed he understood he was wrong, says program director Mark Chernoff of Imus' flagship station, WFAN, in New York City. Rosenberg also sent a written apology to the Williamses.
>
> (*Sports Illustrated*, 2001: 34)

Sharpley-Whiting (1999) provides the historical context for Rosenberg's outburst. Though primarily engaging with nineteenth- and twentieth-century French representations of Black women from Hottentot Venus to Josephine Baker, throughout the text and explicitly in the epilogue, Sharpley-Whiting (*ibid.*: 6) argues that the Black Venus master-narrative is reasserted in other milieux and in contemporary historical moments: 'black women, embodying the dynamics of racial/sexual alterity, historically invoking primal fears and desire in . . . men, represent ultimate difference (the sexualized savage) and inspire repulsion, attraction, and anxiety, which gave rise to the collective . . . male imaginations of Black Venus (primitive narratives)'.

Regarding the ways in which this master-narrative is reproduced in contemporary tennis journalism, I was surprised to discover the number of times the sisters were described or referred to as 'delicious', revealing the ambivalent semiotics of 'inter-racial' desire: 'The notion of the Williams sisters battling in Grand Slam finals, their hair beads and gargantuan groundstrokes whipping through the wind, is beyond the delicious fantasy stage' (Silver *et al.*, 1999: 39). That said, *Ms.* magazine's rationale for including Venus and Serena Williams among the 2001 recipients for 'Ms. Women of the Year' offers an alternative but still racialized and therefore relational feminist characterization, which claims to celebrate the very attributes which rendered the sisters undesirable to a heterosexual male market: 'For serving up a discomfiting mix of sinew, grit, coal black kink and 'tude – and daring to call it woman' (*Ms.* Online, 2001). Hence, these four media examples confirm that what it means to be an embodied Black sporting female is already and always oppositional (Zirin, 2005; Hoberman, 1997). With both their ever-changing hairstyles and dress codes, on the court Venus and Serena actively challenge these same prevailing representations of the Black embodied female aesthetic while also defying the conventional etiquette of the lily-White elite tennis world. In doing so, they strategically subvert their contradictory positioning as hyper-sexual Black women and hyper-masculine female athletes (Schultz, 2005).

Mindful of the dangers of racial essentializing shaped by authenticity claims, I also suggest that both sisters exploit an 'authentic ghetto Blackness' in both its embodied symbolic and its commodified expressive forms: 'to say it is a "black" thing doesn't mean it is made up entirely of black things' (Kelley, 1997: 42). Constituent parts of a racially transcendent reinvention process that produces the American origin myth of the 'rags-to-riches' self-made (wo)man (Grewal, 2005), I argue that *on the court* they position themselves and are indeed constructed as 'ghetto Cinderellas'. This performative role was fashioned for them by their father Richard Williams, who joins a long line of 'tennis-fathers' (Spencer, 2001). As a 'present Black father', Williams has also been instrumental in challenging the stereotype of the 'Black father' whose absence is said to have such a deleterious social impact on burgeoning Black womanhood (Wertheim, 2002). Journalist Allison Samuels (2001: 46) refers to him as 'part huckster, part stage dad, part ambassador, part entrepreneur'. Despite the fact that by ages eleven and ten, respectively, Venus and Serena had left 'the 'hood' and were living in suburban Florida, where they attended private school and had a professional coach, in a 1998 interview, Papa Williams (as he is known on the circuit) perpetuates the myth of his daughters' *exclusively* 'ghetto' origins and artfully intertwines their embryonic development as athletes with the emergent West Coast Hip-Hop scene:

> Richard began taking Venus regularly to the courts, and a year later, Serena began coming along. Among the locals who strolled through the park, he says

> were future rap stars Eazy-E and Snoop Doggy Dogg. There was also the neighborhood crack dealer with his AK-47 . . . Gradually Richard befriended the local gang members, and the three Williamses became fixtures on the Compton courts.
>
> (Jenkins, 1998: 103)

Regarding Papa Williams' conjuring of Compton, sadly life imitated art, when, in 2003, Venus and Serena's half-sister Yetunde Price was murdered in their old neighbourhood. Two years later, as part of a larger media assault on 'knuckle-heads' in the 'Black community', entertainer, educator and activist Bill Cosby led a one-man crusade to repatriate Venus and Williams symbolically and reclaim them for Compton:

> 'How difficult is it for Compton to have a parade so that parents can bring the children and hold them up and say: "They're from here?"' he asked the hundreds of residents who came to talk about turning things around in their violence-plagued city . . . 'You're known for a lot of things, Compton – not many of them good ones. Why don't you bring them out?'
>
> (Garvey, 2005)

Ironically, the 'ghetto' dimensions of their Compton beginnings are parts of a past neither Venus nor Serena could strategically afford to disavow (Kelley, 1994). It is both these 'authentic' origins and their indisputable talent which also make them ready-made role models for many Black fans on the other side of the Atlantic:

> The sisters' singular achievement has been to bring to tennis a black culture that previously was almost entirely missing: in their style, their sense of fashion, their physique, their self-confidence and their flamboyance . . . Venus and Serena are wonderful role models not only, and most obviously, for young black women, but for us all. Long may they reign.
>
> (Jacques, 2005: 20)

By focusing on the Williams family's calculated deployment of authentic 'ghetto Blackness', I am not thereby discounting the political and historical significance of the sisters' athletic achievements and prowess nor how their dominance of the game has transformed the social landscape of tennis and exposed the racism at its core (Douglas, 2005). Yet, racism and caricature notwithstanding, one can never underestimate the power nor the expectations Black female sporting celebrity status yields (Zirin, 2005; Andrews and Jackson, 2001; Spencer, 2001).

Suburban Cinderella and her fairy god-mammies: Black bourgeois feminism and the politics of entitlement

Black feminist standpoint theories, like other (post)modern paradigm shifts, including feminist standpoint epistemology, clear space and make textual room

for multiple subjectivities and bestow agency upon the formerly silenced (Hull *et al.*, 1982; hooks, 1984; Collins, 1990). In doing so, (post)modern Black feminisms contest the limited Enlightenment definition of 'the reasoning subject', challenge all claims to truth and objectivity, and acknowledge the historically situated, socially/culturally specific and strategic nature of knowledge production as it is integral to the dynamics of all power relations (Hammonds, 1997; Kaplan and Grewal, 2002). Yet, such an anti-essentialist stance does not erase the existence and persistence of structural inequalities (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997). That said, institutional marginalization on gender, 'race' or disciplinary grounds aside, those of us who do strive to reconcile the materialist and post-structuralist war(s) of position(s) cannot evade suspicion as self-appointed mouthpieces for 'the weak' while simultaneously producing these knowledges within the confines of relative ivory-tower privilege and prestige (Adair, 2005; hooks, 2000; Mohanty, 2003; Grewal, 2005). Nevertheless, I write from a critical space that is mindful of the ideological and epistemological pitfalls of a Black feminist critique of class, however it is reconfigured: 'In the absence of ideologies and activism for economic justice and human rights, conventional feminisms displace radicalism, reducing radical and revolutionary black feminisms to a shadow's shadow; a poor reflection of black bourgeois feminism' (James, 1999: 182). Taking James's lead, I am staging an encounter between 'the shadow' and 'its shadow'. Put another way, I trace the contours of a post-Civil Rights/post-'race' class consciousness in an era of what Mohanty (2003: 6) describes as 'free-market feminism'.

While the figure of 'ghetto Cinderella' functions as a potent symbol of Black working-class female transgression within the exclusive and exclusionary, predominantly White tennis world, the BAP (not to be confused with 'Ghetto Fabulous') facilitates readings of Venus and Serena's *off the court* complex and contradictory identity performances. Defined by the authors of *The BAP Handbook: The Official Guide to the Black American Princess*, a BAP is: 'An African-American female whose life experiences give her a "sense of entitlement"' (Johnson *et al.*, 2001: 1). Tongue firmly in cheek, Gates (2001: 11) elaborates:

> Oprah's one. Halle's one, too. Venus and Serena round out the list . . . Like JAPs (Jewish American Princesses) and preppies who came before them, BAPs are sophisticated shopaholics who put Sarah Jessica Parker and her Manolo Blahniks to shame. But it takes a lot more than a Fendi baguette full of MAC cosmetics and a Neiman Marcus charge card to qualify as a BAP. She should attend the correct school: exclusive Spelman College in Atlanta. And a respectable BAP must give back to her community, supporting such causes as the United Negro College Fund and sickle-cell anemia research. Some may be offended by the handbook's suggestion that women with the names beginning with 'la' and 'sh' and ending with 'isha' and 'ika' can't be BAPs.

As the epitome of the bourgeois Black feminism that James (1999) criticizes, BAPs symbolize both the partial victories of the Civil Rights and Women's

movements and the complete reign of free-market capitalism (Pough, 2004; Springer, 2002; Chambers, 2003). While mindful of Serena and Venus's inclusion in *The BAP Handbook*'s role-call of famous BAPs (curiously both Rosa Parks and Angela Davis are also mentioned!), my relegating them to BAP status is inspired by two particularly illuminating texts. The first is their self-help book entitled *Venus and Serena: Serving from the Hip: 10 Rules for Living, Loving and Winning* (Williams *et al.*, 2005). The second is their appearance on *Oprah* to promote this new book, which coincidentally aired on 30 March 2005, the day after they played each other in the quarter-finals of the Nasdaq-100 Tennis Open. Their book appeals to 'raceless' suburban female adolescent constituents, whose everyday realities are a far cry from the authentic 'ghetto Blackness' to which they make coded references, signifying they are 'hip sistuhs' (*ibid.*). 'Got your back', 'back in the day', 'crib', 'bling bling', as well as both the title of the book – *Serving from the Hip* – and the 'Sister Rules' framework are all linguistic plays on authenticating Black signifiers (*ibid.*). At the same time, there is only one explicit reference to 'race', and this was to mention an 'inspiring' poem, 'Dreams' by Black artist of the Harlem Renaissance Langston Hughes. Deference to expressive Blackness without a broader reference to embodied Blackness is also evident in the pumping Hip-Hop soundtrack that accompanies the 'dream-making' segment on *Oprah*. In fact, Oprah has become a billionaire by cooking up a digestible Black feminist politics of acceptability and serving it to 'ordinary' Americans (Collins, 2004; Marshall, 1997). This mainstreaming is exemplified by the show on 'The Secret Life of Girls', featuring Venus and Serena Williams, the actress Jada Pinkett Smith and a Black woman psychologist as emotional 'wet-nurses', and 'troubled teens' as guests, but not the lived experience of even one young Black woman. The stories *Oprah* showcases include those of a sixteen-year-old who is 'notorious' for having had sex with eight boys, a seventeen-year-old who seeks plastic surgery to correct her 'hideous' nose, and a sixteen-year-old emotionally 'empty' overeater. The powerful 2002 series 'The War on Girls' in the Black women's magazine *Essence* paints a more inclusive and complete picture of this 'crisis' wherein:

> Black girls are twice as likely as White girls to be overweight (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System).
>
> Black teen girls are almost twice as likely as White girls and in 1999 were 22 percent more likely than Black boys to be victims of crime (Bureau of Justice Statistics). Black girls are nearly 3 times as likely as White girls and more than twice as likely as Hispanic girls to have had intercourse by age 13 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System).
>
> Delinquency cases involving all girls rose 83 percent from 1988 to 1997, with a 106 percent hike among Black girls compared with a 74 percent rise among White girls (American Bar Association/National Bar Association).
>
> (Villarosa, 2002: 95)

In spite of earlier feminist struggles to uncouple these dichotomous public/ private associations, *Oprah*'s 'Secret Life of Girls' episode and to a lesser extent *Essence* magazine's 'War on Girls' reproduce a differentially gendered youth discourse on loci of social control (Pilkington and Johnson, 2003; Valentine *et al.*, 1998; Wulff, 1995; Amit-Talai, 1995). That is, in post-industrial urban Western societies, young women are primarily relegated to the private sphere, where their practices are individualized, sexualized and medicalized: that is, promiscuity, body image and eating disorders (Griffin, 1997). While by implicit comparison, young men are predominantly situated in the public sphere, where their actions are collective, criminalized and legislated: that is, gang behaviour (Kinshasa, 1997). That said, the cited *Essence* statistics, contemporary incidences of anorexia among young men and the rise in female gangs defy this binary logic.

Thanks to Title IX legislation, competitive sport is a public sphere activity that can vanquish the body image anxieties that plague so many teen women (Birrell, 2000; Dworkin and Messner, 2002). For example, among the teen tales recounted on the aforementioned episode of *Oprah* is that of Kelly, a suburban White blonde teenager in the eighth grade who is 'truly disadvantaged' because she is six feet tall and wears a size 12 shoe at age thirteen. Her only refuge from the 'fe fi fo fum' taunts of her schoolmates is the tennis court, where she has competed successfully in many tournaments. Not surprisingly, her chosen role models are Venus and Serena, whom Oprah recruits to help stage 'Operation Surprise Kelly'. This unsuspecting suburban Cinderella is picked up in a white stretch limousine and whisked away to the Nasdaq-100 Tennis Open's Center Court in Miami, where Venus and Serena, her fairy god-mammies, await. Before 'the ball', Nike, Serena Williams' transnational corporate patron, dresses Kelly from head to toe. Prior to their coaching Kelly on the finer points of 'achieving the dream', including 'leaving the negative people behind', Venus and Serena play her in a two-on-one match – their figurative dance at the ball. However, the climax of this suburban fairytale is yet to explode back at Harpo Studios in Chicago. After publicly extolling the virtues of Kelly's 'inner and outer beauty', Serena draws the magical tale to a close by presenting Kelly with a custom-made size 12 tennis 'slipper' – courtesy of Nike.

Collins (2004: 138–9) offers a useful analysis of the BAP syndrome promulgated by Oprah and promoted by Venus and Serena:

> the controlling images associated with poor and working-class Black women become texts of what not to be . . . Oprah Winfrey reinforces an individualistic ideology of social change that counsels her audience to rely solely on themselves . . . Yet Winfrey's message stops far short of linking such individual changes to the actual resources and opportunities that are needed to escape from poverty.

At the heart of a rose-tinted BAP outlook is an amnesia that deliberately downplays the lived repercussions of persistent social inequalities. These structures make 'dreams' affordable for the few rather than the many. When this

bourgeois feminism is harnessed to the predatory capitalist interests of transnational corporations, as was the case with the multi-million-dollar endorsement deal Venus and Serena forged with McDonald's, the outcome is particularly compelling:

> McDonald's created a campaign for Venus and Serena about an 'African American History Year' in response to a national 'African American History Month': 'My ancestors have opened far too many doors for me to only walk through one' . . . It is hard to imagine what an earlier black winner of a women's grand slam title, Althea Gibson, would have thought of such comments made so lucratively on behalf of a multinational company such as McDonald's. When Gibson was at the same stage as Venus and Serena in 1955, after 10 years of tennis and as the reigning French Open champion, her life had scarcely changed: 'I am still a poor Negress, as poor as when I was picked up off the back streets of Harlem and given a chance to work my way up to stardom,' she said.
>
> (Adams, 2005: 19–21)

The multi-million-dollar endorsement deals with multiple multinationals garnered by Black super-star sporting celebrities such as Venus and Serena Williams, golfer Tiger Woods, basketball greats Michael Jordan before and LeBron James since are frequently wheeled out as evidence of how far the winds of social change have blown since the segregationist era of Althea Gibson or even Arthur Ashe (Zirin, 2005). Three shifts in the political economy are closer to fact. One is that, in the twenty-first century, sport in all its myriad forms is a colossal and lucrative business (Schaaf, 2004; Zirin, 2005). The second is that Madison Avenue advertising executives now shamelessly embrace and in fact pander to the buying power represented by the 'Black dollar' (*Brandweek*, 2005; Chin, 2001). Third, these same corporate image-makers consistently exploit the abilities of certain Black celebrity athletes (and entertainers) to convert the symbolic social and cultural capital encoded in commodified and fetishized urban Black cool into hard-cash profits (Dyson, 2001; Carter, 2003).

'All about the money, honey': transnational corporate patronage and the 'perplexities' of 'giving back'

There is a memorable scene in Cameron Crowe's 1996 hit film *Jerry Maguire* where the Black wife of a professional Black football player is negotiating with her husband's agent for a more lucrative contract, which would include what she refers to as 'the Four Big Jewels of Celebrity Endorsement' – the shoe, the car, the clothing line and the soft drink. This comical exchange between the characters played by Regina King and Tom Cruise highlights the significant ways in which the economic destinies of professional sport, transnational corporate enterprise and the multimedia are entwined. Corporations produce commodities, and then

deploy advertising executives to market their products to willing consumers. In this global age of overexposed celebrity worship, the super-star athlete, already also a performer, is frequently hired to accomplish this marketing feat (Rowe, 2004; Marshall, 1997). As Andrews and Jackson (2001: 7) suggest, 'the manufacturing of sporting celebrities has become a highly systematized, almost McDonaldized . . . process . . . the sport celebrity is effectively a multi-textual and multi-platform promotional entity'. With the globalization and commodification by corporate America of caricatured urban Black culture as the pinnacle of cool, it is increasingly Black celebrity athletes who are 'shown the money' (Carrington *et al.*, 2001; Dyson, 2001; Ross, 2004).

As suggested earlier, the most famous Black celebrity athlete turned commodity endorser and one who is said to have paved the sponsorship way for other twenty-something Black super-star athlete-performers such as Tiger Woods and the Williams sisters is former Chicago Bulls basketball player Michael Jordan (Schaaf, 2004; Kellner, 2001). Yet, to invoke an old adage: to whom much is given, from whom much is expected. In the 1990s, when the media trained its spotlight on both Nike's exploitative labour practices in subcontracted Asian sweatshops and the spate of alleged Air-Jordan related crimes in 'inner-city' American communities, Jordan was criticized for neither taking a political stance nor uttering a condemning statement (hooks, 2000; LaFeber, 1999; Hapke, 2004).

Sport, commerce and media represent an 'unholy trinity' (Schaaf, 2004) and Black super-star celebrities are the lubricant greasing the wheels of this global capitalist machinery (LaFeber, 1999). Before I focus on the entangled fortunes of Serena Williams and Nike as they represent the tainted bountiful fruits of what I conceptualize as transnational corporate patronage, it is worth pointing out what I refer to as 'the eclipse of Venus'. That is, while Serena seems to court celebrity assertively (on and off the court), as much as is possible when one's every move is chronicled in the press, her more introspective and shy older sister Venus appears more comfortable beyond the glare of the limelight (Spencer, 2001; Wertheim, 2002). By signing her as a global icon and 'trademarked Nike Goddess' (Adams, 2005: 19), Nike has been instrumental in the multimedia cultivation of Serena Williams' celebrity image. However, by capitalist design on Nike's part and by strategic decision on Serena's, the moment that deal was sealed, for both, the possibility of any real political engagement with social and economic injustice is foreclosed. Thus, any acts of 'corporate responsibility' orchestrated by Nike, which usually bear the public face of celebrity-athlete-performers such as Williams, are in reality 'perplexing' manifestations of what I call ethical charity as opposed to responsible social action. Put simply, ethical charity is a form of reputation management for multinational corporations, like Nike, whose labour practices are deemed not only unethical but exploitative (Hapke, 2004).

As an illustration of the political-economic dynamics of transnational corporate patronage, the cover story for the March 2005 edition of the business magazine *Black Enterprise* was 'The 50 Most Powerful African Americans in Sport'. This feature showcased the accomplishments of Black men and a few Black women, who as agents/promoters, coaches/managers, executives or athletes had

managed to transcend the colour barrier in professional or collegiate sports. Only three athletes made the cut – the 'old timer' Michael Jordan and two 'newcomers', Serena Williams and Tiger Woods. The rationale for their being chosen was:

> [These] big-name athletes . . . represent a new generation of athletes who are able to garner millions of dollars in endorsement deals while changing the face of sports and the type of athletes who play. Both Woods and Williams made the lily-white sports of tennis and golf accessible and attractive to young black children across the country. They also made white players step up their game in an effort to dethrone them from their No.1 spots.
>
> (Hughes, 2005: 12)

The three 'big-name' athletes in this line-up all have multi-million-dollar contracts with Nike. Two of the corporate executives on the list also work for Nike. The first is Trevor Edwards, corporate vice-president of global brand management and the individual responsible for Serena Williams' $55-million endorsement deal (BBC News, 2003). The second is Larry Miller, president of Nike Jordan Brand, which achieved sales of $500 million, or an increase of 288 per cent, after he took over in 2001 (Hughes, 2005). In 2004, Nike sales were up 15 per cent to $12.3 billion (Holmes, 2004), but it spends a record $56.6 million a year on magazine advertising alone (*Brandweek*, 2005). Writing about the inequities in Nike's production practices as opposed to its consumption strategies, Hoechsmann (2001: 274) observes:

> Jordan and other celebrity endorsers stand on the cusp between production and consumption . . . Given that Nike has a number of celebrity endorsers at any given time, and the princely sums paid to them do not include the costs of high-end television and magazine ads in which they appear, it appears that Nike spends more money on promoting the consumption of their products than on producing them.

By literally and figuratively harnessing 'authentic ghetto Blackness' to Nike commodities so that its signification conveys as much brand recognition as 'the Swoosh', Edwards and Miller use the 'master's tools' not to build – in the words of Audre Lorde (1984) – a 'master's house' but rather to erect a palatial mansion. For example, a few clicks of the mouse will take the Hip-Hop or 'wannabe' hip consumer to nike.com, and for a mere eighty-five dollars she can purchase an 'SW Iconic Nike Sphere Hoody' from Serena Williams' Early Winter 2005 Collection. For the tennis player who is more concerned about 'the swoosh in her swing' than 'the sexy swish' of her 'SW Iconic Skirt', there is the utilitarian 'Statement Skirt II' for forty-five dollars. With women accounting for more than 80 per cent of all sporting goods purchases, this is niche marketing at its best (Schaaf, 2004).

For celebrity super-star athletes such as Williams, there is a different dynamic at work: the seduction of transnational corporate patronage. I prefer to describe

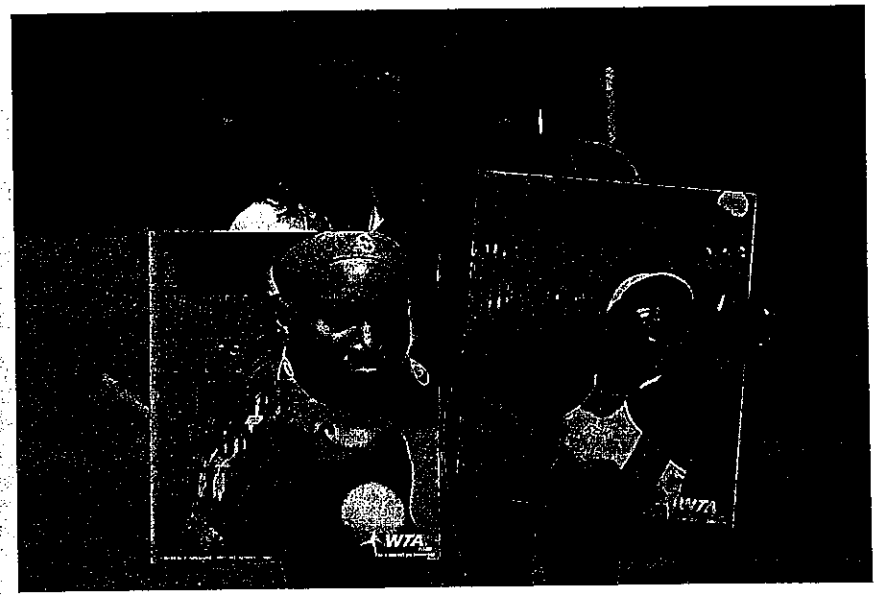

Figure 8.1 Serena and Venus Williams pose during a photo call to promote the WTA's 'Get in Touch with Your Feminine Side' ad campaign at Wimbledon, London, June 2004 © Getty Images

this as a patron–performer rather than a master–slave relationship since the former recognizes the free will of both actors and the potential for mutual capital gain, which is lacking in conditions of enslavement. Nike and Serena Williams collaborate to accomplish two goals: cultivate a recognizable global brand and thereby move more merchandise. At the press conference to announce the sponsorship agreement, Williams declared:

> I am extremely happy to be a part of the Nike family. The company's innovation, creativity and worldwide marketing and retail expertise will be valuable assets for me. I will be working closely with Nike's team of experts to design and create my tennis shoe and apparel, and will also be given creative input in its sports and leisure wear lines for the female consumer. I can't think of a better company to be affiliated with, particularly with my strong interest in design and my involvement in the fashion industry. This will be a great partnership. I want to thank Mr Phil Knight and all of the people at Nike, who worked so hard to make this agreement a reality. They won't be sorry.
>
> (Nikebiz.com, 12 December 2003)

As mentioned earlier, the merchandizing strategy underpinning this partnership is the perpetuation of her now iconic status as a Black siren with a powerful

Figure 8.2 Serena Williams takes to the court during the US Open in New York City, September 2004 © Getty Images

forehand, which was confirmed when she wore 'that catsuit' in the 2002 US Open (Schultz, 2005). In an interview for the Black magazine *Upscale* just prior to signing with Nike, she recalled: 'The catsuit really took it to a whole new level . . . but I think it's great. Even though I don't consider myself a sex symbol, I am' (Ashton, 2004).

Connecting the dots, with so much potential profit to be made, trailblazing in the corporate sports sphere aside, for both Nike's Black marketing executives and their celebrity-performer-endorsers, 'Just Doing It' for Nike will always be more important than 'Doing the Right Thing'. This 'Just Do It' philosophy is echoed in the sisters' aforementioned book for young girls (Williams *et al.*, 2005). In fact, Serena's self-fashioned motto is 'Do You'. She and her sister are collectively worth $100 million, yet in the social class-inflected '"Sister Rule 8": All About the Money, Honey: Bling-Bling Isn't Everything, When it Comes to Cash it's Better to Stash than Flash', Serena advises:

> You can create a fun and exciting future whether or not you're loaded. Of course, you have to work hard and squirrel away your funds instead of spending them all at the mall. But when you save some money every week from your allowance, babysitting or job, you're preparing for life and you can really feel proud of that. By stashing your fund for things that are meaningful – like music lessons or an instrument, basketball camp or a trip to France with your French class – you can learn things and have experiences that will stay with you forever. These types of expenses are 'investments', the type of spending that builds you up and benefits you for a long period of time.
>
> (*Ibid.*: 103)

Such advice is predicated on a specific set of assumptions about access to material wealth and social capital (Green, 2001; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999). Collectively, these suburban realities are emblematic of a Black bourgeois feminist politics of entitlement made manifest by the political struggles of the Civil Rights and Women's movements (Cole and Guy-Sheftall, 2003; Pough, 2004; Springer, 2002). In her feminist manifesto for the Hip-Hop generation, Morgan (1999: 59) declares:

> We are the daughters of feminist privilege. The gains of the Feminist Movement (the efforts of black, white, Latina, Asian, and Native American women) had a tremendous impact on our lives – so much we often take it for granted. We walk through the world with a sense of entitlement that women of our mother's generation could not begin to fathom. Most of us can't imagine our lives without access to birth control, legalized abortions, the right to vote, or many of the same educational opportunities available to men. Sexism may be a very real part of my life but so is the unwavering belief that there is no dream I can't pursue and achieve simply because I'm a woman.

These dreams may no longer be deferred for Williams, Morgan or the women featured in Chambers' controversial book, who, in Chambers' (2003: 86) words, are in search of 'empowerment without the expectation . . . that [they] would carry the mantle of the race'. However, Hurricane Katrina, which struck the Gulf Coast of the United States in August 2005, brought to the consciousness of the nation the number of young Black women living the American nightmare. Serena Williams' very public response to this tragedy – pledging $100 per ace for the remainder of the year and then subsequently donating a pair of borrowed diamond earrings with a retail value of $40,000 to be auctioned off on TennisKatrina.com – generated media controversy regarding the true extent of her ethical and charitable inclinations:

> As the rest of the country shudders about Hurricane Katrina, the Williams Sisters fed nearly every bad stereotype about rich, spoiled, self-absorbed athletes there is. You'd never know their father, Richard, hails from a Louisiana family of sharecroppers, a personal connection that you'd think might make the disaster more deeply felt . . . The reason Venus and Serena deserve to be singled out is no one has preened more about their nouveau riche status or called attention to their conspicuous consumption like the Williamses have at this year's Open or in their vapid reality show before that. The sight of Serena – a regular on *Forbes* magazine's list of top-paid athletes in recent years – hailing herself as a 'philanthropist' for her underwhelming hundred bucks-an-ace pledge while she was using her fingers to play with her diamond necklace was just too much to take. Especially when she suddenly noticed her reflection on the desk in front of her and began turning her head this way and that to admire the light exploding off the diamonds
>
> (Johnette Howard of *Newsday* quoted in Tandon, 2005)

To make matters worse, when USA Network broadcaster Michael Barkann informed Serena Williams that the infamous diamond earrings had a retail value which surpassed the $21,700 career earnings of her US Open opponent Jung-Jan Chan, her response was: 'You gotta have the bling' (Rovell, 2005).

Conclusion

Under such charged complex social, political and economic conditions, what will become of Serena and Venus Williams and their 'philanthropic' endeavours is a sideline story yet to unfold. However, deploying the popular cultural figures of the 'ghetto Cinderella' and the 'Black American Princess', who represent the extremes of social deprivation and entitlement respectively, this chapter sheds light on the nuanced complexities of political progress and stasis as they are played out in a post-Civil Rights Hip-Hop generation moment in African American history. The seemingly contradictory on-the-court/off-the-court performances executed by tennis super-star celebrity sisters Venus and Serena Williams provide

the ideal context for the critical exploration of upwardly mobile young Black women's strategic impression management (Goffman, 1959). Moreover, in a twenty-first-century refashioning of a Duboisian double-consciousness (though Du Bois (1903) is never directly cited), the research findings of Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003: 6–7) 'prove' that the Williams sisters' ghetto/bourgeois code-switching is far from an aberration:

> Black women in our country have had to perfect what we call 'shifting', a sort of subterfuge that African Americans have long practiced to ensure their survival in our society. They shift to accommodate differences in class as well as gender and ethnicity . . . From one moment to the next, they change their outward behavior, attitude or tone, shifting 'White', then shifting 'Black' again, shifting 'corporate', shifting 'cool'.

As instructive as this concept of 'shifting' is, what I find more captivating are both the apparent dominance of 'the one-drop rule' as an explanatory model for defining racial differences, and more explicitly Blackness, in the United States (Ifekwunigwe, 2004a) as well as the ways in which social status is configured in specific racialized ways. This 'racial' hegemony is evident in my 'ghetto Cinderella' and 'Black American Princess' appropriations, wherein 'race' and class are also conflated.

By focusing on two of America's major obsessions, sport and celebrity, I have argued that mediated by corporate America and its shameless appropriation, commodification, and manufacture of a prescribed 'authentic ghetto Blackness' while keeping the heterogeneous Black populace at bay, celebrity-sport-performance like popular Hip-Hop culture in all its gendered political economic manifestations selectively and individually empowers but collectively and strategically disempowers African American young women and men, who cannot translate ghetto cultural capital into 'bling-bling' economic capital (hooks, 2000; Edwards, 2000; Carter, 2003; Kelley, 1997). In particular, I suggest that for the post-Civil Rights Hip-Hop feminist generation, protest and complicity take on multiple, contradictory and complex forms. These 'perplexing' contradictions are exemplified by the Black super-star sporting celebrity sisters Venus and Serena Williams, whose athletic achievements signal the triumph of talent over adversity but whose lucrative sponsorship deals also highlight the seductive double-bind of transnational corporate patronage.

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and important collection. An extra-special thank you to my husband and self-professed 'sports junkie' Chris (Felix) Nwoko, for the invaluable and frequently impromptu 'vibeing' sessions, which facilitated the birthing of this chapter. Finally, a joyful 'shout-out' to Isaiah Uchenna, our beautiful son, who was born during the production process.

Notes

1 As I have argued elsewhere (Ifekwunigwe, 2004a), conceptions of 'race' are historically, geographically and culturally specific and thus do not travel easily. Throughout this chapter, when I use the term 'Black' it is in reference to the American 'one-drop rule', which subsumes anyone with at least one known African ancestor under this heading (irrespective of whether they also have European and/or Native American ancestry). Similarly, like Kitwana (2002), when I discuss the 'Hip-Hop generation', I am specifically referring to Black youth. This does not discount the fact that as a social movement, Hip-Hop has always been multiracial and multi-ethnic. For excellent histories of Hip-Hop and its generation, see Chang (2005) and Watkins (2005).

2 The 'lunch counter' is in specific reference to four Black college students, who in 1960 staged a sit-in at an all-White Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. This non-violent protest of apartheid conditions in the Southern United States inspired others to participate in additional sit-ins over a period of months. These sit-ins were also replicated by activists in other parts of the South. This direct action eventually led to the desegregation of Woolworth's and other chains.

3 Venus Ebone Starr Williams was born on 17 June 1980 in Lynwood, California. She turned professional in 1994. Since then, her athletic achievements have been many and significant, including winning two Gold Medals at the Sydney summer Olympics in 2000 (the singles and the doubles with her sister as partner), the 1999 French Open doubles with her sister Serena, and five other doubles and two mixed-doubles grand slams. In 2000, she won the singles tournaments at both Wimbledon and the US Open and successfully defended both titles in 2001. In 2002 and 2003, Venus was the finalist at five major finals, all of which she lost to her sister Serena. Although ranked only 14 at the time, in 2005 Venus made a turnaround and competed in the longest women's Wimbledon final in history, in which she beat Lindsay Davenport and garnered her third Wimbledon title in six years. After this dramatic victory, she was plagued by wrist injuries, which contributed to a considerable drop in her ranking. However, in 2007, she won the WTA Cellular South Cup in Memphis, Tennessee, and astounded all when she also clinched her fourth Wimbledon title in eight years. This final was significant for three reasons. First, her opponent, Frenchwoman Marion Bartoli, had made history the day before by beating the number 1 seed Justine Henin. Second, the final was contested by two of the lowest-ranked players: Bartoli was seeded 18 and Williams 23. Finally, this was the first time the playing field was level in terms of the prize money garnered by female and male athletes at Wimbledon. Tennis legend Billie Jean King had fought tirelessly for pay equity and happened to be in the stands watching this historic match. In her victory speech, Williams thanked King for spearheading the equal-pay campaign as well as for all she had done to advance women's tennis. In 2008, Venus retained the Wimbledon singles title by defeating her sister in the final. In 2005, *Tennis* had named Venus number 25 in its list of the 40 greatest players during the magazine's existence. This multi-talented tennis star is also an aspiring interior designer, with her own company, Venus Starr Interiors. For more on Venus Williams, see www.venuswilliams.com. Serena Jameka Williams was born on 26 September 1981 in Saginaw, Michigan. She turned professional in 1995, and has accomplished as much in the athletic arena as her sister. In 1999, with her US Open victory, she became the first African American woman since Althea Gibson in 1958 to win a grand slam tournament. That year, she and her sister also won the doubles at the US Open. She won the US Open singles again in 2002, the French Open in 2002, Wimbledon in 2002 and 2003, and the Australian Open in 2003 and 2005. Unfortunately, her tennis career has also been interrupted by injuries, particularly to her knee. Many doubted her staying power until she made an astounding comeback at the Australian Open in January 2007. She was the lowest-ranked woman (81) to win a grand slam singles trophy in three decades. She dedicated this triumphant win to her murdered sister Yetunde Price. That same year, she went on to win the Sony Ericsson Open in Miami, Florida. In 2008 Serena won the US Open, and with Venus won the doubles at both Wimbledon and the Gold Medal at the Beijing Summer Olympic Games. Both sisters have reached number 1 in the WTA (Women's Tennis Association) standings. Like her older sister, Serena's talents and interests extend beyond the tennis court. She is an emerging fashion designer with her own clothing line, Aneres, and aspires to be an actress, having appeared on several television shows and in films. In April 2005, ABCFamily aired a reality television show, *Venus and Serena: For Real*, a behind-the-scenes look at their lives. For more on Serena Williams, see www.serenawilliams.com.

4 Although there are feminist scholars of sport who do engage with 'race' and gender politics (Birrell, 2000; Scraton, 2001, Spencer, 2001), I was approached by Ben Carrington, the co-editor of this anthology, to contribute a piece as a corrective to the under-representation of Black feminist voices in Sport Studies.

5 'I focus on how identities are embodied through consumption, and how consumption constitutes women as gendered subjects through language, through market and cultural interactions, and through class and labor in multiple modes of social becoming. As subjects operating within economic constraints and interpellated in multiple discourses, perplexity reveals the excess of subjects – how they are more than just their bodies' (Ramamurthy, 2003: 543).

6 This distinction was influenced by co-contributor Grant Farred's chapter, which is partly a philosophical treatise on the proprietary relationship between the 'overwaged' professional soccer player and the 'underwaged' fan.

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