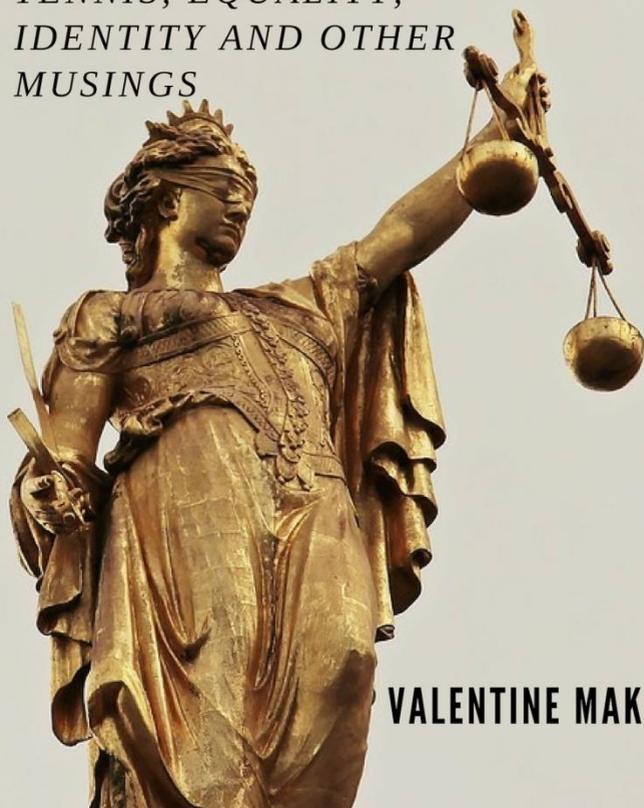


# OF PEASANTS AND PRIVILEGE

*TENNIS, EQUALITY,  
IDENTITY AND OTHER  
MUSINGS*



**VALENTINE MAKONI**

**Inspired by the 2018 US Open**

# Of Peasants and Privilege:

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*Tennis, Equality, Identity and other musings*

**By Valentine Makoni**

**Inspired by the 2018 US Open**

Written by: Valentine Makoni  
Book Cover Image: Pixabay.com  
Book Cover Design: Valentine Makoni  
Editor: Bethany Andrea Zaloumis

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## **Foreword**

No information is abstract and sport is no exception. The way we interact with our teams, stars, games, championships and winners is informed in large part by our identity: the loyalties we choose to possess; and the experiences we had that unconsciously influence our perspectives.

**Of Peasants and Privilege: *Tennis, Equality, Identity and other musings*** is an exploration of the subjectivity of the world. Of how one author saw the 2018 US Open tennis championships through the unique lens of their identity. Drawing on a diverse range of stimuli; from music to images; interviews to narratives... this micro book seeks to become complimentary commentary that enriches an already wonderful sport: Tennis.

The musings oscillate between being a think piece and an emotional catharsis; being of a critic and a fan; honing in on singular moments and locating them within historical context. *Of Peasants and Privilege* does not seek to be definitive truth, it seeks to be distinctly human.

## Dukkha

To support Novak Djokovic is to suffer.

David Foster Wallace once wrote a seminal essay on the religious experience of watching Roger Federer, 'to marvel at his grace and beautiful game and to be filled with reverential awe at his genius strokes'. These words mirror the unbridled joy that many Roger Federer fans have as they watch him.

To support Novak Djokovic is to suffer. It is to aspire to relief, not joy. Brief respites in suffering for glimpses of triumphant relief, only to be a hamster on the treadmill again. It is an odd thing to say about supporting a man with 14 Grand Slams, the joint third number of Grand Slams of all time and the second highest number this year.

But, in tennis, unlike in other individual sports such as golf, one does not simply compete against the court (or the course). One actively and competitively engages against an opponent on the other side of the net. To be good, isn't good enough to win if your opponent is better. To be amazing won't cut it when your opponent is in scintillating form.

*To be one of the greats isn't sufficient, when your opponent is THE greatest.*

This is how it feels to support Novak Djokovic. It is not only to see good serving, and metronomic backhands, but it is to be persistently and acutely aware of the indomitable careers of Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal, and painstakingly aware of

the inferiority of every achievement to that pantheon of greatness.

It would be one thing if it were only Nole fans that were guilty of such envious comparisons. Unfortunately, it is actively ingrained in Novak himself.

From the days he was ranked as the third best player in the world, losing in big matches to Rafa and Roger, he craved, with palpable hunger, to be #1.

To the days he felt smaller due to not having won the French Open. Year after year of great tennis, amazing tennis, sometimes Grand Slam winning tennis (especially at the Australian Open) leading to existential heartbreak at Roland Garros. First to Rafael Nadal, then to Stan Wawrinka.

Even when he reached the summit, became the undisputed best tennis player in the world, winning almost every trophy in sight, to feel a gnawing dissatisfaction. That he was not the best that ever was, that he was not loved like Federer and Nadal are, that his talent, dedication and effort is wasted on an audience that either can't or won't respect his accomplishments. It's a tough reality shared by his fans.

To support Novak Djokovic is to suffer.

In some way, Djokovic's fall from the summit of tennis was a blessing in disguise. Through the elbow injuries, "personal issues", coaching personnel changes, defeats at low ranked players, loss of form, confidence, ranking, skill, ability, fitness, stature... through all the difficulties, an important recalibration occurred.

Playing tennis, and being good at it, was not a right. It was not an entitlement. It was a privilege afforded few, and one needed to find joy and happiness not in being better than the opponent, necessarily, but in self. In being a better and complete version of self.

If that meant reconciling with Marián Vajda and reconnecting with the roots of that mutual support, it was a good thing. If that meant reconnecting with his wife on a five day hiking trip to the French Alps, it was a good thing. If that meant joy at winning a single match, and graciousness in defeat, it was a good thing. If that meant having less love than Roger and Nadal, but still some love and affection with #Nolefam... it was enough.

As Djokovic steadily and purposely grew in 2018; in confidence, skill, execution, and composure; the gratitude at any positive in its abstract form, not its relative form, was renewed.

In Cincinnati, he really wanted to win the title and become the first man to ever win all ATP 1000 Masters Titles. This was great and exciting, for sure, but it wasn't craved for and

pursued like the career Grand Slam was. His fans accepted that it was something they wanted, but absconded any attachment. We appreciated fate's cruel control and the fallibility of contorting destiny to our will. We let it be.

At the US Open, we *really* wanted Novak to do well. We were aware that winning the US Open would bring Grand Slam number 14, tie Pete Sampras for joint third most titles and be a great occasion.

But, we were also aware that something less than that could just as well be satisfying. A narrow loss in the semi-final to Nadal, for example, would be acceptable. Even a loss to an in-form Del Potro in the final would be tempered by appreciation at a friend deserving of accolades for his considerable talent. A partisan crowd was to be expected, not fought. The crowd's jeers could be a mild annoyance within matches, but could double as a source of fuel to ignite a comeback by invoking an "us against the world" attitude.

So, when that Grand Slam title number 14 was won, it was a great moment. Years of hard work rewarded. A Grand Slam title cherished, for this could be the last one. Nothing more is guaranteed. To savour the moment, relief at the finish line.

And maybe, just a little bit of joy.

## The Tandil Ten

Two contrasting visuals of Juan Martin Del Potro present a striking microcosm of his career.

There is an inspiring photograph of him after he won the silver medal at the Rio Olympics in 2016.

(<https://sanjuan hoy.com/noticia/1652/del-potro-fue-homenajeado-en-su-tandil-natal>) He is standing over a sea of thousands of fans as they celebrate their Argentinian hero.

There is also a video that Juan Martin Del Potro uploaded on his YouTube in 2015

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXU21kVGymU>). He wasn't at a press conference, there were no paparazzi and he wasn't adorned in sponsor regalia. Heck, within the video, he confirmed that he was parting with his coaches. He was scheduled to have a third operation on his troublesome left wrist.

I remember how he spoke, as a broken and injured man who was on the brink of giving up on his dreams of playing tennis. I remember his pain, not because he wanted to be the best and win titles, and travel the world and make lots of money. His anguish stemmed from an athlete who genuinely loves going on a tennis court to play, and misses playing.

It was heart wrenching.

The Tandil Ten are friends who had been on this journey with Juan Martin Del Potro from his native country of Argentina.

But, they are also a little bit of all of us. We who were there during the darkest hours of despondency, depression and despair, now an excitable, exuberant and boisterous camp of supporters in the prime seats of Ather Ashe Stadium. Filling up the arena with an infectious chant of “Ole Ole Ole!” through immersion in a booming crack of a devastating forehand.

Juan Martin Del Potro was grateful for every day of fitness and a chance to go out on a tennis court. His entourage was proud of a humble, loving and kind Argentinian ambassador. An undisputed Top 5 tennis player, from a man who means so much more than simply tennis.

## **Foreshadow**

“Tennis nearer the gods!!”

Any person who even casually watches tennis on SuperSport (or alternative feeds with the same commentary) is familiar with Rob Koenig and his superlatives when he sees a play that he likes.

“Find a soft place for your jaw to land.”

“One for the highlight reel!”

“Tennis nearer the gods!!”

Just like it is true for Jim Beglin and Peter Dury, the colourful voices of the commentary booth provide an indelible enhancement to broadcast sport. A cherished part of the viewing experience.

A recent “innovation” in broadcasting is of having a commentator sitting courtside. A hapless fellow would be whispering into a microphone, mumbling “insight.” I embraced it with some tolerant understanding tempered with mild annoyance. It is forced, stilted and awkward. The nadir was reached during the Nadal vs Del Potro match at the 2018 US Open for the men’s semi-final. As a recurrently annoying plug of “visit [usopen.org](http://usopen.org) for the widest range of caps, towels, outwear and celebrity sightings” was done in the studio, the courtside commentator piqued that he might have seen a man who looked like Justin Timberlake across from him. He wasn’t entirely sure, but the man was wearing sunglasses. Commerce at its egregious worst.

But, a conversation from that courtside commentator may actually provide the most ideal context for the biggest story of the year. Because, as Del Potro rained down powerful forehands, he (yes, he was a he) spoke on how Nadal had looked up to his box, saw a signal from his coach and decided to go deeper into the court so that he could have more time on the return.

What ensued was an extended conversation with salient points. First, it refused to **acknowledge** that Nadal **was** receiving coaching, yet only implied that it was **possible**. In that vein, one of the studio commentators did concede that it is **alleged** not only was it happening in this match, but that Uncle Toni has a long history of coaching Nadal within matches. Secondly, it acknowledged that **if** Nadal was being coached, that would constitute a breach of the code of conduct, and according to the rules of Grand Slam tennis, would merit a code violation. Thirdly, it conceded that this is a **widespread** phenomenon that is neither adequately nor consistently addressed.

Most importantly, the discussion spoke on the **justification** of a ban on coaching. You see, it's not only about an archaic and staid concept that is abstract on what tennis is:

*An individual sport that requires people to problem solve on the court, make adjustments while being able to retain clarity of thought and composure.*

But the absence of coaching acts as an **equalizer**.

In the event that Nadal was receiving coaching, he would have been doing so from Francisco Roig and Carlos Moyá, the latter once ranked the Number 1 player in the world. They are well paid, well experienced professionals whose full time occupation and dedication is coaching Nadal.

That sort of privilege and access to coaching would only be available to the very best players with large contracts and high endorsement deals. A player who just got on the tour, is ranked number 97 and consistently receives first round Grand Slam prize money would enter a match at a distinct disadvantage against great coaches.

You see, coaches in tennis **do** have a significant and palpable impact on the performance of a player. From Stefan Edberg with Roger Federer, to Ivan Lendl with Andy Murray, to Patrick Mouratoglou with Serena Williams, to Marián Vajda with Novak Djokovic, to Darren Cahill with Simona Halep, to Sascha Bajin with Naomi Osaka... the evidence of the **value** of coaching is indisputable.

The justification for the enforcement of a rule that prevents coaching is robust. The lack of enforcement of this rule in tennis, inconsistently applied and flagrantly disregarded is regrettable.

## **The Greatest of All Time.**

Serena Williams is a legendary tennis player. The greatest women's tennis player of all time actually. Her 23 Grand Slam Singles Titles are the most in the Open Era. In addition, she has 2 Gold Medals at the Olympics in singles and doubles apiece, 14 Grand Slam Doubles titles, 2 Grand Slam Mixed Doubles Titles and a joint record for the most consecutive weeks at World Number 1.

Her numbers are only a partial representation of her greatness. It takes seeing her play to see the power that she can wind up in her serve. To appreciate the variety in her shot making. To comprehend the indomitable will she possesses to win, and win relentlessly.

Serena Williams, along with her sister Venus Williams are black icons. They stand as testament to the ability and greatness that is possible in a black body. That can crash an elitist white establishment and establish dominance by sheer force of will and unmatched skill. She is inspirational to the disenfranchised. Her capacity to be great, while training on the public courts of Compton motivates those who come from those same environments. Even musical prodigies like Kendrick Lamar and Boogie see an aspirational version of themselves in her.

Serena Williams is a staunch and unwavering advocate for women's rights. She consistency and, sometimes selflessly, confronts and deconstructs stereotypes of being a woman.

No less, being both a mother and an elite athlete and  
rubbishing the notion of it being impossible to have a happy  
family and a happy career.

Serena Williams is the greatest tennis player of all time.

## Tragedy

The 2018 US Open Final match between Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka was tragic. That Serena's coach **attempted** to coach her is not in dispute. The conflict that its coaching violation instigated, which descended into a farcical atmosphere of toxic boos has been the subject of great and intense debate.

Before we dive into the particulars of the case, it is important to consider the lens that the debate is being had. It can, and has been, framed in a plethora of ways. As a case of a global spectacle and the optics of the debacle, as a tennis issue and the rights and privileges of chair umpires, as a racist issue and Serena's profile as a successful black athlete, as a sexist issue and inequalities between the ATP and WTA tours.

As a black, African male who watches tennis often, my opinion on the matter would be harmful as a dissenting voice **if** it were primarily a sexist issue. If patriarchy was at play, and Serena's gender was a **primary** conceit of the conflict or its escalation, arguing against that would be to speak from a position of privilege, to minimize her valid concerns and to dilute the justifiable activism she would be advocating. But, I disagree that it is an issue of sexism. Completely.

Courtney Nguyen is the pre-eminent female reporter in tennis. Since the days of her 'Beyond the Baseline' blog on Sports Illustrated; through to her year round reporting of the sport under the WTA; her entertaining and informative

twitter feed; to her vocal feminism; I hold her opinion in extremely high regard. She tweeted (then deleted) something that said, “Men should listen to women when they talk about how the final made them feel and others should listen to people in tennis about how they think.”

An island of nuance in a sea of hot takes.

I spent a couple of days in mid-September listening. In my mind, I grew more convinced people perpetuating the idea that the US Open Final was *primarily, importantly, or crucially*, a sexist issue were... well, wrong. It is not.

I think as a man, I do not have the capability to completely position myself as a victim of patriarchal abuse. My capacity to empathize: to know, understand and relate to the struggles of being a woman are *limited*. But, that does not mean my capacity is non-existent. The reason why dialogue (even in its hyperbolic social media form) has value is because the oppressor, *can* understand the position of the oppressed.

There are numerous instances of feminist women raising gender based issues in tennis forcing all of us to confront them.

Unequal pay at Grand Slams (until resolved); the complaints of women “grunting”; the vilification of women who “are not friendly in the locker room” (such as Maria Sharapova); the Serena Williams full body cat-suit at the French Open; the despicable enforcement of women undergarments at

Wimbledon; the snide remarks about 3 set tennis being inferior; the case of Alize Cornet taking off her top and receiving a code violation.... All these are **legitimate** issues that highlight past or present tennis gender inequalities. They deserve attention, advocacy, action and redress. I know them, understand them and support them due to them being raised by people who care about equality.

The case of the 2018 US Open Women's Final is **not** one of these legitimate issues.

First, we look at Carlos Ramos character. Does he have a previous record of being sexist? AKA, does he deserve the benefit of the doubt of being innocent until proven guilty? I would say, he does. After umpiring hundreds of matches, receiving the endorsement of Serena Williams herself; and being certified at the highest level of being an umpire: a gold star badge; we can arrive at a consensus:-

*Before the Final, Carlos Ramos was not a sexist man.*

The secondary question then becomes, were his actions, particularly in the final, sexist? To qualify under this criterion, there needs to be some indicator that a **primary** or at least **relevant** motivator was Serena Williams' gender. In this regard, the commonly held criterion is clear:-

*"Would Carlos Ramos have applied a similar standard of officiating if Serena Williams was a man?"*

As a follow up, the method of determination has reached a consensus

*“One needs to look at Carlos Ramos’ previous officiating with men and see how this compares to the Women’s Final.*

Many videos have circulated on social media of male players shouting, screaming and raving at Carlos Ramos. For those postulating that Serena was treated unfairly because she is a woman, these videos point to a deliberate inconsistency. This is not logically true.

Firstly, Carlos Ramos justification for verbal abuse is not for Williams speaking in a high tone. Nor is it for her disagreeing with his call. Nor is it for her vehement denial that she did not cheat. She did all this and more in a 4 game devolving tirade that started measured and composed and turned ugly and, yes, hysterical. What he gave her a code violation for, is for her calling him a “liar” and a “thief.”

As such, the most relevant footage or videos are not of just shouting and complaining, but cases in which a male player questioned the integrity, competence or suitability of the umpire. When the abuse did not disagree with a call but escalated to attacking the character of the umpire. A congruent example is the 2016 Olympics quarter-final where Andy Murray was issued a code violation for calling Carlos Ramos “stupid.”

This alone shows that Ramos has precedence for issuing code violations to male players for verbal abuse in high profile situations (think of the magnitude of the Olympics). But even more revealing is the defence that Andy Murray mounted. In mitigation, he does not deny that he did say “stupid.” But, that he did so in relation to a call, not in relation to Carlos Ramos.

*“I did not say you are a stupid umpire, I said that was stupid umpiring.”*

This becomes the standard that players acknowledge as a tipping point from venting frustration in an uncouth but excusable manner into unacceptable verbal abuse.

Serena Williams called Carlos Ramos a liar and a thief. She clearly and unequivocally attacked his integrity. And, more damningly, these allegations have gained traction with the viewing public, incurred sharp critique of Carlos Ramos, like in the Washington Post <http://bit.do/peasantsbook> that emphatically begins with “Chair umpire Carlos Ramos managed to rob not one but two players in the women’s U.S. Open final” and jeopardized his profile to the extent that it is highly unlikely he will umpire a Grand Slam Final ever again.

Yet, this should not be the case. Specifically because, Williams’ accusations (and her sympathizers) aside, the evidence is robust that it is simply his personality and character to be a stickler for the rules and enforce otherwise overlooked infractions.

The coaching violation recalls Nadal's fury at time violation warnings before the serve clock was a thing.

The verbal violation recalls the case of Nick Kyrios and the code violation he received for shouting "towel" at a ball boy too loud.

The racquet abuse violation recalls the case of Novak Djokovic at Wimbledon and his violation for.....racquet abuse.

Even if we were to look outside Ramos, there is a plethora of evidence of other umpires issuing code violations to men in a similar or even more severe way than women. There is compelling statistical and anecdotal evidence that this was not an anomalous occurrence.

At the 2018 US Open, umpires issued 88 code violations to men, and 22 code violations to women. John McEnroe **DID** receive a GAME violation for his temper tantrum, at the 1990 Australian Open, and it resulted in him losing an entire match.

Carlos Ramos was not sexist, and accusations that he was are defamatory, harmful, misplaced, misguided and inappropriate.

## Take a Knee

No one watches the Super Bowl in Africa.

Fine, I lied. Some people do, but they are as common as people who watch handball.

Ten years ago, a cousin of mine from America visited his home country, Zimbabwe, for a couple weeks. I remember him waking up at 3 in the morning, to turn on an obscure channel on television, so that he could watch the Super Bowl. It was my first ever exposure to American Football and it didn't make much sense.

*I have never watched a single complete match since.*

Yet, I was filled with warmth, joy and happiness when Colin Kaepernick was signed by Nike.

I probably won't see any of the ads, I don't have American Television.

I have no idea how good he is or was, I never watched the NFL.

I will probably never buy Nike shoes, I can't afford to.

Yet, I was happy when I saw the ad, saw the excitement, saw the justice.

Colin Kaepernick, a victim of racism, had received partial restoration.

You see, as a black man, issues of racism have a strong resonance with me.

I hurt when I see taking a knee being misrepresented as an affront to American Troops, instead of as a civil protest against the slaughter of unarmed African-Americans by racist police.

I hurt when I see the throwing of bananas in soccer to black athletes as a jab of being a monkey.

I hurt at the ill-treatment of Caster Semenya by the global media for looking different than the stereotypical 400 m female athlete.

I hurt when I see the abhorrent cartoon of Serena Williams in the Australian press, drawn as a caricature of a black baby and Naomi Osaka painted as a white blond girl.

Racism is rampant in society, sometimes manifests in sports and is justifiably an emotive and personal issue to many people around the world. Key to note here is the transcendent nature of racial identity.

Whether in the case of seeing racism or seeing black excellence, blackness is so powerful an identity that we do not even need to engage with the particulars of a case to feel strongly about it. As vividly shown by the Colin Kaepernick example, the issue of racial identity necessarily invokes strong reactions from opponents and supporters alike even when they know very little about the sport.

Against this backdrop, while I have understanding for the triggered reactions of black folk in the case of Serena Williams at the 2018 US Open, I dissent that it is a case of racism. Revisiting the logical progression of the sexism examination, the questions may be reframed thus:

- i. Does Carlos Ramos have a previous record of being racist?
- ii. Were his actions, particularly in the final, racist?
- iii. Would Carlos Ramos have applied a similar standard of officiating if Serena Williams was white?
- iv. How does Carlos Ramos' previous officiating with white people compare with his actions in the Women's Final?

In my opinion, the answers to these questions are inconclusive based on lack of strong supportive evidence but have a strong bias towards the negative. That is, this was not a racist issue.

To posit it as so does more harm for racial equality than good. It (incorrectly) paints advocates as irrational, blind whiners of non-existent discrimination. But, more importantly, it detracts from *real* racist events, none more egregious than those faced by Serena Williams herself (like the 2001 Indian Wells debacle). The 2018 US Open Women's Final conflict was not a case of racism, and it shouldn't be debated as if it were.

## **Balance of Power**

I am 80% sure that Carlos Ramos watched the match between Nadal and Del Potro, and 10 % sure that if he did not watch the match, someone informed him of unsanctioned coaching infractions and the discussion that occurred in the commentary booth. All I can do is speculate anyway, because umpires are not allowed to do press.

I say this because, while his actions were harsh, I found them ***defendable*** through a strict interpretation of the rules of Grand Slam Tennis. On this point, everyone agrees.

By the letter of the law, Carlos Ramos was right to give a code violation for coaching infraction.

By the letter of the law, he was right to impose a code violation and point penalty for the infraction in respect of racquet abuse.

By the letter of the law, he was correct to issue a game penalty for verbal abuse.

Where I differ, with just about everyone else, is that I not only find his actions defendable, I find them ***commendable***. Because, while I have spent a significant amount of talking about what the conflict wasn't (it was neither sexism nor racism), it is time to examine what it actually was.

*It was a case of Power: of peasants and privilege.*

John Witherham has a fascinating series on SI Tennis known as 'The Mailbag.' The interactive content provides unprecedented insight into tennis that makes for a richer viewing experience. In the post Wimbledon Mailbag of 2018, he wrote about the power that big name athletes yield in terms of scheduling.

“Here’s a point I heard multiple times and, as a parent, one that has extra resonance. Tennis needs to do a better job of reducing the practice of player lobbying. The stars know they can go the tournament office and get an audience. “I want a night match.” “I want court X.” “I want to play early and need some extra tickets for my sponsors.” When the tournament accedes, one child knows that they now have leverage on their parents. As Catherine Pearlman would say: “Ignore It!”

You see, apparently it matters which court a player plays. Whether it is because of the prestige and status of being on a show court like Arthur Ashe or Louis Armstrong, or it is for the discrete and reduced pressure of going to Court 1, or it is for the functionality of having a roof at Wimbledon that reduces the threat of interrupted matches due to rain.

It also matters what time a player goes on court. Earlier in the day and they are exposed to extreme heat, may become fatigued and underperform. Later at night and they can optimize on more forgiving temperatures. Yet, others would be wary of being scheduled after a men’s 5 set match leading

to reduced recovery time, uneven warm up and build-up of nervous energy.

So, players, big and powerful players, or their agents, routinely go to the scheduling office and voice their demands.

And the scheduling office listens to them.

Serena Williams has power- an enormous amount of power.

She is the greatest women's tennis player of all time who has millions of adoring fans.

She has amassed considerable personal wealth, and many people depend on her for their paydays.

She has access to a far reaching global audience through press conferences, sponsor ads, documentaries and a vibrant social media profile.

She has a strong entourage of coaches, agents, hitting partners, sponsors and management.

She has a host of celebrity friends and family. A billionaire husband, a 7 time grand Slam Champion sister in Venus Williams, Beyoncé, Kelly Rowland and The Duchess of Sussex, Megan Markle are all in her corner.

Serena Williams is tennis royalty.

Carlos Ramos is a tennis peasant.

For being the chair umpire of the Women's Final, he was entitled to a windfall of \$450. This is the standard daily rate for such officials.

Pretty much, no-one knew his name before the 2018 US Open. He was known, outside tennis most inner circles of players and reporters, as a faceless umpire. I watch a lot of tennis, and I didn't even know his name.

For judging the US Open Women's Final, he would not be awarded a trophy of achievement, but a memento of cursory gratitude, which can be shunted out of the prize giving ceremony at will.

He isn't allowed to give press conferences, he has no sponsorship endorsement deals, he has no "fans" that accost him as he walks around the grounds of the US Open and he doesn't have a Twitter profile.

He doesn't even *make* the rules that he enforces on the tennis court. That is for the governing body, the ATP Players Council, the Financiers, the sponsors, the fans, the tournament director, the referee supervisor and a host of other brokers to do.

He simply has to go on court, say love, fifteen, game, set and match then get out of the way.

That is his job.

Carlos Ramos, is a tennis peasant.

But he is a peasant who does his job in a diligent way. Calling time, incurring the wrath of players, quietly and innocuously judging slam after slam and calling code violations.

Then he takes his \$450 windfall, and goes home.

Carlos Ramos, is a tennis peasant.

## **Of Honour and Valour**

I not only find Carlos Ramos conduct in the US final defensible, I find it commendable.

Because, I know what it's like to feel like a peasant. To be overworked, underpaid, underappreciated. To be a disposable pawn in the masterplan of those with power. I encounter it every day just like billions of other people do. At work, at home, in social circles or at the national level where kingmakers, campaign financiers, military industrial complexes, media houses, "intellectuals" and "technocrats" bully one into submission.

And, I know what it feels like, to want... just a little, to fight back against those powers. To stand your ground, refuse to waiver and assert your right to do exactly what you should, but can't because it inconveniences someone it shouldn't.

For clarity, I don't just say it because of Serena Williams. I say it for when he sanctions Novak Djokovic, Andy Murray, Nick Kyrios, Rafael Nadal and the assortment of wealthy, powerful global superstars that count for tennis royalty feeling entitled to preferential treatment, special exemption from standard code of conduct and indulgence in their comfort of privilege.

Were more of our referees, administrators, arbitrators, judges and justices as committed to that non-discriminatory ideal of equality and fairness; ignoring the entitled contestations of the elite; we would ALL be in a better place.

## **Best Friend**

Eminem has an underrated verse on Yelawolf's slept-on album, *Love Story*, on the song *Best Friend*.

Touching on faith, spirituality and brotherhood, he turns in a ferocious and impassioned performance dedicated to Proof. It's a genius at his virtuoso best.

Yet, one line nags,

"And I don't have yes men  
They gonna tell me when I'm \*\*\*\*\* up"

This isn't true. But the saddest part is he does not know it to be so. Wrapped up in a superstar cocoon, the yes men around him indulge his worst excesses while shielding or minimizing any discontent.

The stan in me would like to absolve my hero, Eminem, from the disdain at his warped worldview and place the blame squarely on a support cast that should know better.

But, then you realize that Just Blaze tried to tell him that he didn't like part of his recording and was kicked out of the studio. That Joe Budden criticized *Revival* and was dissed on *Kamikaze*. . That Dr Dre doesn't even say what he doesn't like so he can protect Eminem's feelings. Dre has to deliver critique in code (see the story of "where is the fun.") The stark truth is, Eminem is a global superstar, insecurely

protective of his art and has an enabling support system of yes man.

It wouldn't be so bad, in general, if it didn't lead to bad musical decisions that alienate those who love what he does. Who are forced to endure 12 Skylar Grey remakes of Love The Way You Lie in a vain attempt to recapture a runaway hit; who are forced to listen to countless Rick Rubin produced Beastie Boys knockoffs; who are forced to grind their teeth at the saccharine corniness of Bruno Mars intruding on a Bad Meets Evil album; who are forced to endure the clanging clumsiness of Alex Da Kid in track after track after track of "stadium pop."

All this talent, all this genius, all this excellence, diluted in a sea of atrocious music fed because it fits the template of an Eminem "sound." It's annoying, it's painful, it's sad.

Which is why, in some warped way, the awfulness of Revival was a blessing. "Walk on Water Gate" as he calls it, finally generated an unmistakable public uproar of anger, disappointment and frustration so ferocious that it penetrated the yes man created cocoon and forced him to acknowledge his flaws.

Kamikaze is a partial restoration, which shows how difficult it is to course correct. Who said Nice Guy, Venom, Good Guy and Normal were good ideas? That dreaded... best friend.

## **Aftermath**

If the Serena Williams' meltdown in the US Open Final was a car crash, the hours and days thereafter were a train wreck.

It was ignited by the impassioned defence of her actions by Serena Williams in the press conference after the final, inflamed by the cheering entourage of sympathetic acolytes, fanned by the spineless capitulation of the USTA and the WTA and spread like wildfire across commentators, tennis channels, national news websites, twitter trending stories, podcasts and newspapers.

I watched in forlorn sorrow as anyone with even a smidgen of nuance or objective perspective was shunted aside to allow the loudest and "biggest" voices space. The enablers, in their numbers, praised Serena for her valour against a system that punishes her for being a strong black woman. The vilification of Carlos Ramos was vicious and unrelenting. Attacking his conduct, his character, his profession and his prospects. Hung out to dry; and thrown under the bus.

Even the feeble defences from the Association praising him for integrity seemingly scolded him for rocking the boat.

The conflict which started as a tennis dispute, mutated into a grotesque cultural war where the elephants of overt and subtle racists (Serena's Cartoon) locked horns with the crusading civil rights advocates (led by Billie Jean King) and Carlos Ramos, and any associated umpires or other tennis peasants, where the grass trampled on.

## Caricature, Enhance

There is an utterly despicable cartoon drawn by King from the Australian Newspaper known as the Herald Sun. Drawing Serena Williams as a caricature baby, with oversized lips and nose, while painting Naomi Osaka as a blonde white girl in the background... It was obviously racist. Clearly vile.

My hair is nappy, my \*\*\*\* is big, my nose is round  
and wide

You hate me don't you?

You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my  
culture

You're \*\*\*\*\* evil I want you to recognize that I'm a  
proud monkey- Kendrick Lamar

The photo, rightfully caused global outrage and a deep discussion about the representation of black people in media.

Yet, I found myself equally saddened by the post US Open photos of Naomi Osaka as seen here

<http://bit.do/peasantsbook> . With a weary smile, limply holding up her trophy after hours of media rounds.

Torpedoed into the vapid orbit of celebrity.

Even more disheartening, was her make up. Plastered on her face, in a bid to enhance, clearly distorting the human I had watched on the court. It wasn't that she looked terrible... it's that she looked.... Different.

Hair policing is a livewire issue in South Africa. It was most infamously brought into sharp focus by the Pretoria girls' high school that protested a dress code banning natural nappy hair. It didn't look right, feel right, in these hallowed halls.

I like the way you, lift up your eyes  
Those lips are colourful, all of the time  
But I wonder do you mind  
No make-up today... - Kendrick Lamar

I respectfully accept that a man, or anyone for that matter, shouldn't tell a woman how to dress, do her hair, apply her make-up, flaunt or conceal her curves. It's her body.

But, I also see the forces at work. Nudging and pushing. Whispering and encouraging. Enhancing Naomi. Telling her this looks better in the light, and this is more expensive, and this is more exclusive, and this satisfies this lucrative partner.

In my ignorance, I find the "nudge" towards a woman (all women, not just black women) to beauty enhancement as harmful as the Serena caricature shows. One uses overt racism to demean and offend, to laugh at what it does not comprehend or accept. But, the latter uses subtle means to undermine the same black body. To provide conditional acceptance of what is, but full acceptance when changed, altered, spruced up, enhanced.

I have a picture of Naomi, after winning Indian Wells, lifting a trophy. <http://bit.do/NaomiIW> she looked brown, her hair was wild and she was radiant.

She had a loped smile on her face, of barely contained glee, of palpable nervousness and of distinctive individuality.

As it reminds me then, and will forever be true, the duality of a steely and determined competitor on the court, mentally battling high risk down the line backhand returns and executing cross court strategies, happily co-exists with a soft spoken, shy teen who likes a little hip-hop in her ears before the match, and a little Beyoncé afterwards.

When asked what she wants to be in tennis, inhabits the greatest personality of all time, quoting Pokémon.

“I want to be the best, like no one ever was.”

- Naomi Osaka

## This is mine

When I was 8 years old, two of my uncles came to visit our home so they could watch a soccer match. Along with my father we split into two camps each supporting opposite teams. I settled in to watch my very first match.

I remember that it was during the week, so I had school the following day. My mom, making some tea in the kitchen, asked if I was not due to go to bed. With 3 minutes of left to play, and my team losing 1-0, I shouted back, "Five minutes."

A minute later, my team scored! As I jumped for joy, I rushed to my mom in the kitchen. "Please, we just equalized, we are going to extra time so can I stay up for 30 minutes?" She didn't seem pleased, but agreed.

As soon as I rushed back, we scored again! We had won... I don't know what, but we had won! Without extra time, I stayed an extra 10 minutes to watch the trophy presentation and vowed to support this team for the rest of my life.

I had just watched Manchester United beat Juventus to win the 1999 UEFA Champions League final.

Supporting sports is an arbitrary and irrational enterprise. Even now, in the age of the parasitic Glazers, and mercurial Pogba and sourly, out-dated Mourinho and the unseemly mess of it all, I still support the red devils.

It begets belief.

## **Innie Minnie Minnie Mo**

Simona Halep upended my US Open. I was bullish entering the tournament, encouraged by the strong performance of my two chosen players. Novak Djokovic and Simona Halep. Both Grand Slam winners this year, calm, measured, and in form through the US Open Series, the signs were good.

And then, the World Number one lost in the first round.

It wasn't a catastrophe, and her quite upbeat and gracious press conference afterwards was evidence of that. She was disappointed to lose, sure. She was aware she could have played better, of course. But she lost to a good opponent, playing amazing tennis, and that is the nature of the sport. She would dust herself down, go onto the next one and try win again. She already had a Grand Slam, and was the number 1 player in the world. She could be happy.

But, it did leave me in an awkward situation. You see, supporting women's tennis in the last couple years has been... demanding.

If you are not in Serena Williams corner, it's hard to find an alternative who can match up.

Agnes Radwanska is quaint in an endearing sort of way. With her squat position, scuffed shots and incredible tennis IQ, she is a pleasure to watch. But also her fragile body means she may not even enter the draw at all.

Sloane Stephens is all power and grit. But she is soooo... American. Along with Matek Sands, and Jack Sock and Isner and Madison Keys and... too American.

How about Victoria Azarenka? She is ok. I mean, she can play with the best of them. She would hold her own against Serena. Except, the custody battle rightfully deserves more of her attention than this tennis business.

Eugenie Bouchard is cute. She even has nude sports illustrated covers and a fire Instagram. But completely and utterly uninspiring as a tennis player.

I guess I settled on Karolina Pliskova. She had power, poise, and a real shot at the title. Plus, she has a twin sister, somehow that is inspiring.

Well, snap, she just lost to Serena Williams. A bummer.

Gonna need to find a woman to support at the US Open.

## **Naomi Osaka**

“I was just thinking, I would not forgive myself if I let myself lose the match.” - Naomi Osaka

16 words, and I was hooked. After randomly watching the women’s Round of 16 match between Naomi Osaka and Aryna Sabalenka. I was impressed by her performance. She seemed to have a real sense of controlled power, particularly on her serve. She had great shot selection and good execution. She had ability and composure, and it was a portal into a raw talent growing into her own.

Her tennis talent made me like Naomi Osaka, her personality made me fall in love with her.

Just that admission, that she contemplated losing and it made her sad, was so raw, so honest, so vulnerable. It showed a humanity that is increasingly rare in these cookie cutter and media trained exchanges with the press.

And, as I took a deep dive into her googled profile, the gems just kept coming and coming.

There was the video of her trophy presentation when she won the title and gave “the worst presentation speech of all time.” Giggling, laughing, congratulating. Happy.

There was the New York Times profile detailing her haafu status and partial acceptance in Japan and the struggles that her parents endured in disapproval of their union.

There were the stories of her father, coping Richard Williams template in raising world class players.

There was her video on Instagram where she tries (and fails) to play pool. There was the story of her love of Beyonce, and the tweet lamenting her missing a Beyonce concert.

Story and after, image after image, source after source, all in unison- Naomi is a talented tennis player, and a lovable personality to boot. None more endearing that her on-court interview after the US Open Semi-final match with Madison Keys.

“13 Break points faced in the match, 13 Break points saved. How did you do that?”- Interviewer

“This is going to sound really bad, but I was just thinking, I **really** want to play Serena.”- Naomi Osaka

“How did you manage your nerves and composure so well in this match?”

“That is news to me. I thought I was, like, visibly shaking. But trying to think I have never been in this situation before and I am grateful to be here.”

“What was going through your mind as you went to serve it out?”

“Don’t double fault.”

“Your mom is here, what would you like to say to her?”

“Mom, I did it! I love you.”

“Given how much you wanted it, a message to Serena?”

“I love you.”

“Anything else to add?”

“I love everybody!”

And my heart melted like butter.

## The summit

I can't imagine what it was like for Naomi Osaka that day.

How she felt walking into a stadium of thousands of people.  
Playing at the US Open where she used to come as a  
spectator. Playing in her very first ever Grand Slam final.  
Playing against her childhood idol Serena Williams. The  
surrealism of it all must have been incredible.

But, I watched that match with cautious optimism. Rooting  
for her, against all odds, to win.

Happy when she broke for 3-1.

Happy when she had the double break.

Happy when she won the first set.

Happy when she broke Serena again in the second set.

Happy, at match point, when she fizzed in an unreturned  
serve.

When she rushed to her box, she high fived her team, then  
stood in a long embrace of cathartic joy with her mother.  
Finally, reward for all those moments of strife and struggle,  
dreams realized, the summit reached.

Tears of joy were shed. And I cried too.