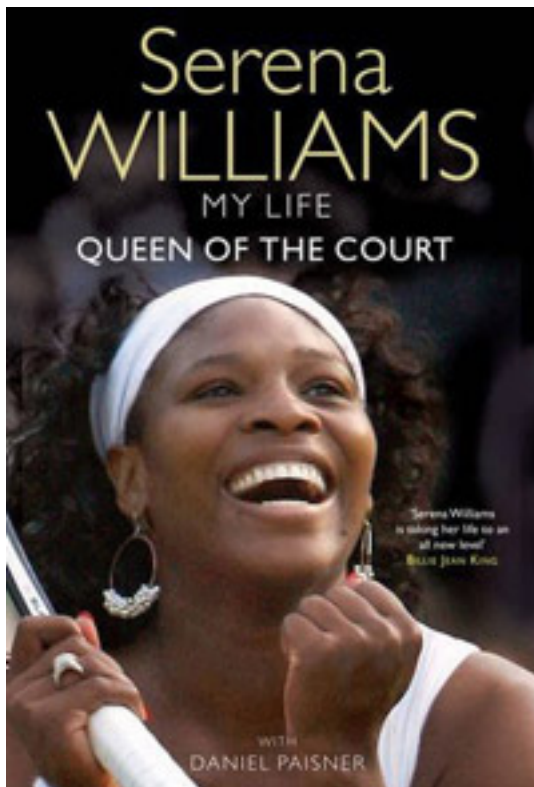


## Serena Williams - Beautifully human

Written by Julianne Malveaux, NNPA columnist  
Thursday, 17 September 2009 15:42

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Days after Serena Williams melted down during her US Open match with her long-time friend and fellow tennis champion Kim Clijsters, the controversy continues to swirl. As of this writing there is talk of a possible suspension, further fines, and other action against the phenomenal tennis diva who let her intensity and passion run away with her when she reacted inappropriately to what may have been a faulty foot fault call on the part of an overzealous line judge. Several of the commentators noted that the foot fault call was untimely and perhaps inappropriate. Nothing, however, excuses Serena's behavior.

Microphones picked up her use of profanity, her threatening manner toward the line judge, and her obfuscating conversation with the umpire. Her comments have generated so much controversy that you would think she had, say, hollered at the President of the United States as he was giving a major policy address. While Serena critics call for everything but her head on a platter, Congressman Joe Wilson, the South Carolinian who called President Barack Obama a liar, has drawn a line in the sand and says he will apologize no more.

While the stages are different, there is an interesting parallel. White men can apologize once, say they won't again apologize, and get a relative pass on their behavior. Indeed, after a tepid apology, Wilson has gone one to put a defiantly insolent video on the Internet essentially excusing his behavior. You can bet that Serena Williams won't get away as easily.

Both Serena Williams and Joe Wilson need to reflect on their behavior. The difference between the two is that we have evidence that Serena can reflect; Wilson's case is far more murky. In her new autobiography, *Queen of the Court*, Serena Williams writes about the game of tennis as a metaphor for the game of life. One of the things she talks about is the need to shake off the mistakes of the last point, set, game or match as a way of moving ahead. The pace of tennis is such that if you dwell on the last point you can't move to the next one, and that's often

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the case with life. We have to take enough time to learn from our mistakes, but we surely can't dwell on them to the point that they become crippling or paralyzing.

If you are down 5-6, 15-30, you can't really worry about the last serve, you have to worry about the next one. Serena's book is a great reflection on her life and her challenges, and as she struggles with the aftermath of last Saturday's loss, I hope her own words will give her comfort and peace.

Many of us were quite disturbed at the manner and method of Serena's Saturday loss. Yet as I watched her walk up to the net and shake Kim Clijster's hand, I also saw her, in the words of songstress Jill Scott, as beautifully human. I saw her as both a young woman, and a seasoned one. I saw her as an intense young woman who let the heat of the moment push her into a zone that she clearly regrets, and as a woman who did not allow her intensity to prevent her from being gracious toward her opponent.

I saw her as so strong and yet flawed, a player who acknowledged her mistake in reacting so intensely. And, yes, I saw her as a tennis icon whose love for and contributions to the game of tennis carry much more weight than her Saturday mistake. Most of all, I saw her as someone who has had to shoulder the many ways that race and gender shape her experiences in tennis, a woman who has all too often been treated unfairly, even harshly, by those who make great profit from her amazing athletic prowess. Serena Williams is beautiful, beautifully human, resplendent in spite of, and because of her flaws.

Congressman Joe Wilson is getting a pass for his ignorant and intemperate behavior when President Obama spoke. Indeed, he has given himself a pass. I hope that the beautifully human Serena Williams will get the same kind of pass from herself and the world as she embraces and learns from her meltdown.

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