

# TMQ

Teaching Media Quarterly

ISSN: 2573-0126

Volume 6, Issue 2: Teaching Intersectionality, 2018

[pubs.lib.umn.edu/tmq](https://pubs.lib.umn.edu/tmq)

## **Engaging Students of Intersectionality Through Sports Media: Using Women's Tennis to Teach the Matrix of Domination**

Kristi Tredway



All work published in *Teaching Media Quarterly* is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

 **LIBRARIES**  
PUBLISHING

## Engaging Students of Intersectionality Through Sports Media: Using Women's Tennis to Teach the Matrix of Domination

Kristi Tredway, St. Mary's College of Maryland

### Overview

Theoretical frameworks are more easily understood for students if they can see application to their own lives, current events, or popular culture. In my teaching, I regularly apply dense theoretical concepts to current issues that students are likely to be aware of or have pondered. The theoretical framework of intersectionality readily lends itself to application with current events or elements of popular culture. In particular, I rely on women's professional tennis for five reasons: 1) Players have already broken barriers by being female athletes; 2) The experiences and treatment of female players can easily be compared to those of male players; 3) Tennis is the most high-profile women's sport in our culture and its top players are celebrities beyond the sport; 4) Tennis has a long history that is entrenched in a particular white, upper-class milieu that still pervades the sport; and 5) There are players who enter professional tennis who are marked as different against the backdrop of this white, upper-class milieu and are faced with a cultural repercussions. Thus, women's tennis offers various vantage points for viewing the concept of intersectionality.

Intersectionality is a particular knowledge project that facilitates our understanding of the lived experiences of those who are affected by race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, and other identities, *and* how social inequalities are organized, operate, and can be challenged in the social world. The social struggle is across relationships that have different levels of power. As such, intersectionality has an implicit and often explicit commitment to social justice. There are many scholars focused on analyzing multiple identity markers; however, few properly engage with the equally important facet of intersectionality, which is how power structures our understanding of particular identity markers, as well as how power is different across various sites. As Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge assert, "intersectionality's core insight [is] useful: namely, that major axes of social divisions in a given society at a given time, for example, race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and age operate not as discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but build on each other and work together" (Collins & Bilge 2016, 4).

The lesson plan outlined here offers a focused look at Collins' "matrix of domination" (Collins 2000; 2009) as the explanatory model for seeing and understanding the various levels of power which operate in our society. Injustices occur because intersectional identities exist in and through four domains of power: structural, hegemonic or cultural, disciplinary, and interpersonal. These four domains of power, known as the matrix of domination, show how "intersecting oppressions are actually organized" (Collins 2000, 18). Collins' visual for the matrix of domination (Collins 2009, 54) is provided below.



<b>STRUCTURAL DOMAIN</b>	<b>CULTURAL DOMAIN</b>
Institutional Structures	Ideas and Ideologies
<b>DISCIPLINARY DOMAIN</b>	<b>INTERPERSONAL DOMAIN</b>
Organizational Practices	Relationships and Communities

These four domains of power span every facet of our lives from interpersonal relationships to foundational structures of society and government, with a system in place to punish those who violate the socially-approved codes of behavior or established laws. We live in a media-saturated society making the media the most powerful function of the cultural domain. Through the media, those in power can shape perceptions and beliefs within society; however, those lacking power can use the media strategically as well through, to offer two examples, organizing mass protests of a scale that cannot be overlooked by the media or by using social media, music, writing, and art that calls into question the legitimacy of the those in power. Thus, the media is often a battleground site for the imposition or contestation of power. The cultural domain is where we can see the constant struggles over what are considered the norms of any given society.

Using examples from women's professional tennis, which are highly mediated events, has proven to be effective as explanatory examples as well as increasing student engagement with the sometimes dense theoretical concepts. Due to the high media impact of women's tennis in our culture, the vast majority of students will know who Serena and Venus Williams are, because they have traversed the sport with their celebrity statuses, so students will already have an entry point into the examples. The other two players used – Amélie Mauresmo and Althea Gibson – will likely be less known. The descriptions media outlets used to describe Mauresmo will be understood by most students because their generation is the one expanding the many ways that gender and sexuality can be performed. Likewise, the vast majority of students will have some understanding of the history of racial segregation in the United States providing them with a strong enough background in which to grasp the experiences of Althea Gibson's treatment in the racially segregated world of tennis at the time.

### Rationale

The core themes of intersectionality that Collins and Bilge (2016) highlight are:

- Social Inequality: emerging from Black feminism, intersectionality has been focused on understanding and eradicating social inequality, and lets us see that it is rarely caused by a single factor.
- Power: power relations occur
  1. Through mutual construction of multiple identities, and
  2. Across various domains of power.
- Relationality: intersectionality rejects either/or binary thinking, such as theory to



practice, scholarship to activism, or Black to White.

- Social Context: particular historical, intellectual, and political contexts shaped past events and shape what we think and do now; identities operate differently within various social settings.
- Complexity: social inequality, power, relationality, and social context are intertwined, introducing complexity into intersectional analysis.
- Social Justice: Rejecting the dimensions of knowledge that perpetuate objectification, commodification, and exploitation of any group.

The matrix of domination, and analyses of power, are often missing from scholarship that claims to use intersectionality. Such studies often focus exclusively on identities at the expense of contextualizing the multiple identities within a framework imbued with power. This lesson focuses exclusively on the matrix of domination, bringing an analysis of power to the forefront.

### Timeline

This lesson takes about one hour to deliver, including time for discussion. This lesson would be for one course session, ideally situated after the concept of intersectionality has been taught, either the class period prior or, for longer class sessions, during the first half of class with this lesson following. The matrix of domination needs to be discussed before students have moved to applying the concept of intersectionality or using the concept within their own work.

### Detailed Lesson Plan

Before delving into the matrix of domination, begin with an overview of intersectionality. This would include a discussion of intersectionality including its core themes [slides 3-5].

Intersectionality offers an understanding of the lived experiences of those with particular identities, and also lets us see the different levels of power operating across social structures. Thus, it illuminates how people and societies are organized. The core themes of intersectionality that were previously described are: a deeper view of social inequality, power, relationality, social context, complexity, and a striving towards social justice [slide 5].

Working through to the matrix of domination, I show students Collins' diagram for the domains (Collins 2009, 54), shown previously [slide 6]. When teaching the matrix of domination, I have found that it is most accessible to students if the lesson begins with the:

1. Interpersonal domain: what every student has directly experienced;
2. Disciplinary domain: what every student has at least heard of once it is explained, especially given the widespread Black Lives Matter social movement which is directly focused on inequalities within the disciplinary domain;
3. Cultural domain: what every student has experienced through outlets of popular culture (for example, social media, music, fashion, sports, political rhetoric, etc.); and



4. Structural domain: few students will have a scope for understanding structural inequality on the first pass, but building up to the structural domain through the other domains which they have a grasp of will be beneficial to them.

Approaching the domains of power in this way is the best way to teach the matrix of domination in my experience. Using this approach, the domains build upon each other, beginning with the one-on-one power dynamics and ending with the broad-based structural levels of power. For each domain, I give an explanation of the particular power of the domain followed by an example from women's tennis. I, then, go back to the slide with the definition and ensure that students understand that particular power domain, clarifying any questions or confusion that they may have.

### ***Interpersonal Domain***

The interpersonal domain [slides 7-9] is the domain of everyday interactions, where overt racism and microaggressions between individuals are easily visible. This domain is also where many analyses of racism and bias reside without going further. It is also where many people believe the full extent of biases resides. To believe this is to miss the majority of deeply set power relations that are much bigger than the interactions between individuals.

#### *The Irina Spirlea "Bump" of Venus Williams at the 1997 U.S. Open*

Most students will be aware of what microaggressions and biases look like. I like to show them an example anyway. The example I use is the now infamous "bump" by Irina Spirlea, a Romanian tennis player, and Venus Williams during a changeover at the U.S. Open in 1997. Spirlea, loudly whistling as she walked to her bench, runs into Williams, who was walking to her bench. Afterwards, Spirlea can be seen smiling proudly to her team in the stands (*Venus Vs.*). This is a clear case of bias, and, more specifically, it seems to be race-based bias.

This tournament was Williams' first U.S. Open, and Spirlea was sending her a clear message regarding whether or not Williams belonged there. The protocol in professional tennis is that the higher ranked player passes first during the changeover, and that player was Williams. To those naysayers who may believe that it was an accident on Spirlea's part only need to know that she did the same thing to Serena Williams the following year during her first U.S. Open appearance.

I like to add some humor while I teach, so I ask students if they have heard of Irina Spirlea. I have not taught one student who has, yet everyone knows of the Williams sisters.

### ***Disciplinary Domain***

The disciplinary domain [slides 10-14] is the domain of rules and surveillance. Within this domain, the ways in which rules are differently applied and enforced based on identity markers is readily apparent. For example, Black Lives Matter is a social movement that is highlighting how Black men are treated much differently by the police than others. Indeed, from a policing



standpoint, as compared to white men, Black men are under more surveillance and scrutiny, are seen as threats even when unarmed, and are less likely to receive due process in the legal system because they so often do not live beyond their initial interactions with police officers. These are the issues facing Black men that Black Lives Matter has illuminated. Rules, in this context, are applied differently based on race. This will be an example from our media-saturated culture that students will have heard of but will not have necessarily thought of in the context of the disciplinary domain.

### *Serena Williams' Foot Fault at the 2009 U.S. Open*

It is likely that students will have heard about Serena Williams' outburst at the 2009 U.S. Open when Shino Tsurubuchi called a foot fault on her second serve to Kim Clijsters when she was serving at 4-5, 15-30 in the second set after having lost the first set. Losing the point on a foot fault gave Clijsters match point. Williams' subsequent outburst earned her a point penalty (because she had been given a warning earlier in the match for having thrown her racket), thus ending the match.

Indeed, there are official rules about foot faults; however, the culture of professional tennis is one where it is understood that foot faults will be strictly enforced in the first few games of the match to get players aware of their space, but, after those first few games, it is understood that the matches need to be decided by the players, not the officials. Williams is aware of this culture, as are all players. Tsurubuchi's foot fault call at such a critical moment in the match was egregious, especially given that a foot fault cannot be seen from the replay of the point. Williams lost her temper, and the match, not because she was arguing that she did not foot fault. That was a moot point. She was rightfully angry that the rules were applied differently to her than to other players. Again, this seems to be race-based bias.

### ***Cultural Domain***

The cultural domain [slides 15-18] is the domain of ideology and culture, and what seems like "commonsense" in our society. This is most often controlled or contested through mass media. By manipulating ideology and culture, this domain acts as a link between social institutions (structural domain), their organizational practices (disciplinary domain), and the level of everyday social interaction (interpersonal domain). To maintain their power, dominant groups create and maintain a popular system of "commonsense" ideas that support their right to rule.

### *Amélie Mauresmo Comes Out as a Lesbian at the 1999 Australian Open*

Amélie Mauresmo, an unseeded player at the time from France, came out as a lesbian at the 1999 Australian Open after defeating Lindsay Davenport, then the #1 player in the world, in the semifinals. Mauresmo stated that she came out "not because she wanted to become a symbol or the focus of attention, but because she did not want to dance around the subject throughout her career" (Clarey 1999, 10), as Martina Navratilova had for nearly two decades. Many



students will not have heard of Mauresmo; however, almost all students will find the rhetoric surrounding Mauresmo's coming out as egregious, and therefore engaging.

Prior to Mauresmo coming out as a lesbian, she had only been described in benign terms such as "French," "unseeded," etc. After her coming out, the rhetoric surrounding Mauresmo changed. This change began with Davenport and her descriptions of Mauresmo, and was taken up by journalists who crafted the "commonsense" discourse around Mauresmo. Following Mauresmo's press conference, Davenport entered the press room, clearly aware that Mauresmo had come out moments before, and said the following [slide 16]:

- Mauresmo's "power and physique were overwhelming, that playing her was like playing 'a guy'" (Forman & Plymire, 120; quoting Dillman).
- Her muscles "looked huge to me. I think they must have grown; maybe because she is wearing a tank top" (Miller, et. al., 104).
- "A couple of times, I mean, I thought I was playing a guy, the girl was hitting so hard, so strong. ... She is so strong in those shoulders and she just hits the ball very well. ... I mean, she hits the ball not like any other girl. She hits it so hard and with so much topspin. ... Women's tennis isn't usually played like that" (Miller, et. al., 104).

These descriptions by Davenport caught Mauresmo by surprise. As she described, "Lindsay hits the ball harder than me, she is more powerful than me, and she's six inches taller than me, so that really shocked me" (Clarey 1999). Clearly, something else was occurring to alter the discourse. This rhetoric by Davenport was quickly packaged and distributed by newspaper journalists the next day. In those articles, Mauresmo is described in the following ways [slide 17]:

- "Mauresmo's thickly muscled shoulders bulge from her dark blue tank top, and she struts cockily around the court like a weightlifter in the gym" (Forman & Plymire, 2005, 121), wrote one Associated Press reporter.
- "Oh, Man, She's Good" (Miller, et al., 2001, 105), from the *Herald Sun*.
- "Women normally only play tennis against men in mixed doubles. But that all changed yesterday if you believe the world's number one player Lindsay Davenport" (Miller, et al., 2001, 105), from the *Daily Telegraph*.
- "Shoulders like Lou Ferrigno – she is the French 'incroyable hulk'" (Miller, et al., 2001, 105), from the *Daily Telegraph*.
- "Where is women's tennis headed? Mind boggles at the muscle monsters" (Miller, et al., 2001, 105), from the *Daily Telegraph*.
- "Huge linebacker shoulders" (Miller, et al., 2001, 105), from the *Herald Sun*.

This example shows how the words of one person were taken up by journalists and distributed globally through the media as "commonsense" understandings of Mauresmo as a lesbian. This



shift of the media discourse surrounding Mauresmo has been more fully documented in my article on the topic (Tredway 2014).

### ***Structural Domain***

The structural domain [slides 19-21] can be identified as interlocking social institutions. Because this domain is focused on large-scale, systemwide institutions, and has operated over a long period of time via interconnected social institutions, it is a very slow process to remove bias and segregation of this magnitude.

#### *The Barring of Althea Gibson From U.S. Tennis Tournaments*

To understand the blocking of Althea Gibson, a Black woman and long-time champion of the American Tennis Association (the alternative Black tennis association to the white-dominated United States Tennis Association), from the U.S. National Championships (now called the U.S. Open) until 1950 as racism on the part of the USTA is to miss half of the story. The USTA had anti-discrimination policies on the books. To qualify to play at the U.S. Open National Championships required gaining ranking points through a series of smaller tournaments; however, most of those smaller tournaments were held at segregated country clubs across the U.S. Though Gibson could qualify to play the tournaments, she was not allowed to enter the grounds of the country clubs because of her race. In 1950, with mounting pressure on the USTA, they granted Gibson a wildcard to play the U.S. National Championships thereby bypassing the requirement of attaining certain ranking points.

The interlocking social institutions of tennis allowed country clubs to continue to hold USTA sanctioned tournaments despite the USTA having established anti-discrimination policies. Being sanctioned means that the tournaments count towards ranking points. At any time, the USTA could have denied sanctioning the tournaments at segregated country clubs; however, they did not. Thus, even though the USTA had anti-discrimination policies, these apparently did not extend beyond the corporate offices. By analyzing these interlocking institutions, we can see the complexity and contextualization that intersectionality offers.

### **Teaching Materials**

Resources for teaching this lesson can be found at:

[https://drive.google.com/open?id=1rAFNon5ljmOx9NODIcU1opV90hrlwP\\_T](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1rAFNon5ljmOx9NODIcU1opV90hrlwP_T). The resources at this site include the Microsoft PowerPoint file and PDF document for the lesson, as well as the two video clips described, the one of Venus Williams being bumped by Irina Spirlea and one of Serena Williams' on-court outburst at the 2009 U.S. Open.





**Bibliography**

Clarey, Christopher. "Tennis; Runner-Up's Revelation Likely to Test the Waters." *The New York Times*, January 31, 1999. Retrieved from, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/31/sports/tennis-runner-up-s-revelation-likely-to-test-the-waters.html>

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2000.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Another Kind of Public Education: Race, Schools, the Media, and Democratic Possibilities*. Beacon Press, 2009.

Collins, Patricia Hill, and Sirma Bilge. *Intersectionality*. Polity Press, 2016.

Forman, Pamela J., and Darcy C. Plymire. "Amélie Mauresmo's muscles: The Lesbian Heroic in Women's Professional Tennis." *Women Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 1/2 (2005): 120-133.

Miller, Toby, Jim McKay, and Randy Martin. "Courting Lesbianism." In *Sportsex*, edited by Toby Miller, 103-125. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.

*Serena Williams vs. Kim Clijsters, 2009 U.S. Open semifinals*. Australia 9, 2009. Retrieved February 11, 2013, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXSFPnimclQ>

Tredway, Kristi. "Judith Butler Redux – The Heterosexual Matrix and the Out Lesbian Athlete: Amélie Mauresmo, Gender Performance, and Women's Professional Tennis." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 41, no. 2 (2014): 163-176.

*Venus Vs.* Directed by Ava DuVernay. ESPN Films, 2013.