

#THISMAMA: SERENA WILLIAMS AMPLIFYING THE PERILS OF BLACK MOTHERHOOD

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Article history: Received 25 August 2022; Revised 17 October 2022; Accepted 9 November 2022; Available online 20 December 2022; Available print 30 December 2022.

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ABSTRACT. *#THISMAMA: Serena Williams Amplifying the Perils of Black Motherhood.* In 2020, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) found that Black women are over 200 percent more likely to die from childbirth-related causes than white women (Hoyert 2020). Routinely, Black women describe attending obstetricians and delivery room staff who ignore the mother's knowledge about her own body. In 2017, tennis champion Serena Williams experienced similar discriminatory practices when she nearly perished giving birth to her daughter, Olympia. Motivated to end racial prejudice in the medical treatment of pregnancy, Williams publicized her delivery-story and used Twitter to share her struggle as a new mother. This article examines how Williams uses maternal rhetoric on Twitter to build a community of women who resist dominant discourses about medicine and motherhood. Centered on Williams's tweologism (new hashtag) #ThisMama, Alison Lukowski builds on research on digital maternal rhetoric scholarship (Joutseno 2018; Lukowski & Sparby 2016; Owens 2015, 2010; Friedman 2013; Harp & Tremayne 2006). While Williams's advocacy for Black mothers is a form of feminist mothering, her application of #ThisMama on Twitter demonstrates the tensions between authority, advertising, and advocacy.

Keywords: *maternal rhetoric, digital rhetoric, Twitter, motherhood, race, Serena Williams, social media*

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REZUMAT. #THISMAMA: Serena Williams și documentarea pericolelor de a fi mamă de culoare. În 2020, Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (Centrul de control al bolilor) a descoperit că probabilitatea ca femeile de culoare să moară la naștere este cu 20% mai ridicată decât în cazul femeilor albe (Hoyert 2020). Femeile de culoare americane relatează, de regulă, că obstetricienii și personalul de asistență ignoră faptul că mamele în cauză își cunosc propriul corp. În 2017, campioana de tenis Serena Williams a cunoscut aceste practici discriminatorii când a fost pe punctul de a muri dând naștere fiicei sale Olympia. Astfel, motivată să pună capăt prejudecăților rasiale din tratamentul medical al sarcinii, Williams și-a făcut public episodul nașterii și a apelat la Twitter pentru a-și împărtăși lupta de mamă pentru prima oară. Articolul de față examinează modul în care Williams utilizează retorica maternală pe Twitter pentru a construi o comunitate de femei care opune rezistență discursurilor dominante despre medicină și maternitate. Cu accent pe tveologism-ul (hashtag nou) #ThisMama al lui Williams, cercetările lui Alison Lukowski pornesc și, totodată, contribuie la studiile academice de retorică maternală în mediul digital (Joutseno 2018; Lukowski & Sparby 2016; Owens 2015, 2010; Friedman 2013; Harp & Tremayne 2006). În timp ce pledoaria lui Williams în favoarea mamelor de culoare este o formă de grijă maternală cu accente feministe, folosirea hashtagului #ThisMama pe Twitter evidențiază tensiunile generate de triumful autoritate, publicitate și sprijinirea cauzei.

Cuvinte-cheie: *retorică maternală, retorică digitală, Twitter, maternitate, rasă, Serena Williams, media de socializare*

Motto: "I almost died after giving birth to my daughter, Olympia"
Serena Williams

In 2017, Serena Williams gave birth to a healthy baby girl, Alexis Olympia Ohanian Jr., or Olympia. While Williams is a paragon of physical fitness, she nearly died in the days after bringing Olympia into the world. Serena tried to tell nurses and doctors about her long history of dangerous blood clots and a pulmonary embolism. However, they did not listen to her: "She walked out of the hospital room so her mother wouldn't worry and told the nearest nurse, between gasps, that she needed a CT scan with contrast and IV heparin (a blood thinner) right away. The nurse thought her pain medicine might be making her confused" (Haskell 2018). Williams insisted that she needed specific care. Instead, they delayed further and performed a doppler ultrasound that revealed nothing. When she continued to cough for no apparent reason, the medical staff

finally sent her for a CT scan, where they discovered numerous blood clots in her lungs. Over the next six days, Williams coughed so hard she reopened her C-section incision and had a filter surgically installed in one of her major arteries to break up clots forming throughout her body. She spent the first six weeks of motherhood in bed. She nearly died because her physicians and nurses would not listen to her about her own body. She knew that somebody needed to say something.

Unfortunately, Williams is not alone in her experience. In 2020, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) found that Black women are over 200 percent more likely to die from childbirth-related causes than white women. Delivery nurses and physicians ignored Black women's pleas for help, descriptions of pain, and claims of something not feeling right, which resulted in women's death after lifesaving interventions were attempted too late. Similarly, in their 2017 spotlight on maternal mortality among women of color, Nina Martin and Renee Montagne report on the death of Shalon Irving, an epidemiologist at the CDC and Lieutenant Commander in the US Public Health Service (Martin and Montagne 2017). Despite her education and years of research about inequalities in health care for the poor, Irving died three weeks after giving birth due to complications. Her death showcases that race, regardless of class or education, is the most significant predictor of maternal mortality in the US. Irving's story and the myriad other stories collected in ProPublica's Lost Mothers series demonstrate that Williams's experience is a shared experience amongst women of color. Staggering statistics and stories prompted Serena Williams to publicize her ordeal. She leveraged her global celebrity and social media presence to raise awareness about the struggles of Black motherhood.

What Is Feminist Mothering?

In many ways, Williams epitomizes what Andrea O'Reilly calls feminist mothering: "Feminist mothering refers to a particular style of empowered mothering in which resistance is developed from and expressed through a feminist identification or consciousness" (O'Reilly 2007, 802). Williams may not routinely use the f-word, but she describes herself in feminist terms. When interviewed after her controversial loss to Naomi Osaka, Williams stated, "I'm here fighting for women's rights and for women's equality and for all kinds of stuff" (Williams 2018j). Or, as O'Reilly succinctly states, "feminist mothering *begins with recognition that mothers must live her life and practice mothering from a position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy*" (802). Feminist mothers use their power, in the home, at work, and in public to draw our

attention to social problems. Likewise, Williams employs her celebrity and social media platforms to draw attention to a public health issue that affects her and other women of color, and she tweets about the challenges of motherhood to lend veracity to her claims. This essay will demonstrate that Williams's advocacy for Black mothers is a form of feminist mothering, but her application of #ThisMama on Twitter is fraught with contradictions.

On its surface, O'Reilly's definition of feminist mothering appears empowering for all women. However, O'Reilly fails to recognize the intersectional identities in motherhood and the concomitant challenges to surviving motherhood. In her critique of O'Reilly, Amy Middleton (2006) calls this "mothering under duress." For women from historically marginalized groups, social and material mothering circumstances may make it impossible to exercise agency, authority, and autonomy over their bodies and those of their children. For instance, women of color are more likely to be referred to child protective services; in fact, over 90% of children in foster care in New York City are Black or Latinx (Meyerson 2018). Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and women of mixed race are much more likely to be incarcerated; Black women are twice as likely as their white counterparts to be placed in prison (Carson and Golinelli 2014). Most recent census data shows that 25% of disabled women, 18% of Black women, and 15% of Latinx women live in poverty, compared to 8% of white women (Fern 2020). For Indigenous women in the United States, murder is the leading cause of death, ten times higher than national averages (Lucchesi and Echo-Hawk 2018). Feminist mothering is nearly impossible under these conditions, for one cannot be "autonomous" and "authentic" when the threat of hunger, incarceration, and personal safety are front of mind.

In many ways, Serena Williams's publication and tweets about her challenges in giving birth echo Middleton's critique of O'Reilly. One of her first official responses to childbirth was an op-ed for CNN in which she recognized her positionality as a Black mother and called on us all to donate to UNICEF because "Every mother, everywhere, regardless of race or background deserves to have a healthy pregnancy" (Williams 2018i). That same day, she tweeted "Help save lives by calling on [world] leaders to prioritize quality, affordable health care for mothers and newborns. Sign @UNICEF's petition TODAY!" (Williams 2018a).² In other words, Williams recognized the privilege her wealth and fame have handed her, and she used her vast public platform, Twitter especially, to bring attention to the struggles of poor women worldwide.

² Tweets, by their nature, are an informal form of discourse; thus, they often contain capitalization and spelling errors. Rather than noting or editing every error, the tweets are reproduced accurately.

Writing Feminist Mothering Online

Despite the blind spots in O'Reilly's argument, Williams engages in feminist mothering, especially when considering the social expectations for silence during childbirth. Despite their significant role in the moment, women lose all agency in childbirth. In *Writing Childbirth*, Kim Hensley Owens (2015) suggests that women expect to be "rhetorically disabled" during birth. Meaning, many women believe they cannot reasonably communicate due to an imbalance of power between themselves and their physician, or the trauma to their bodies will render them speechless. A woman may write a birth plan because of "her temporary inability to speak for herself. Her writing is expected to stand for her voice" (Owens 2015, 68). In many cases, the mother loses complete control over how her body is treated during labor and delivery. Like many women who die from childbirth, Williams's real medical challenges occurred *after* the birth. For instance, Donna L. Hoyert and the CDC (2020) found that over a third of women's deaths within a year after giving birth were directly related to the pregnancy and delivery, and over two-thirds of those were preventable. Even when Williams could communicate clearly, her physicians still discounted her knowledge about her own body. When her physicians were not listening to her, Williams tried to take on greater authority: " 'I was like, listen to Dr. Williams!' " (Haskell 2018). As with many women of color, Williams was ignored until she nearly died. She had multiple surgeries and weeks of bed rest after giving birth.

Like many celebrity mothers, Williams speaks about her ordeal with reporters. However, she distinguishes herself as a feminist mother when she writes about her experience and uses it as a platform to inform the public about the plight of Black motherhood. She uses her voice, story, and likeness on Twitter to showcase that Black motherhood is different and perilous. Like other celebrity mothers, Williams could have depended on a glossy profile in *Vogue* to share her news. However, she takes agency over her story. For decades, scholars of gender and race have noted that women regain discursive power through a variety of genres, such as storytelling, memoir, letters, diaries, and testimony. Today, many women, particularly new mothers, find comfort and support in online communities and social media.³ For instance, Twitter user and journalist Aja Williams (@ajawilliams09) tweeted, "Everytime I see stories of Serena's birth tale, it was eerily similar to mine, except I battled severe baby

³ Women of color can participate easily in social media discourse because access and speed of composition are not barriers to participation. In the past, women of color were often barred from participation because of the costly hardware and time required to write. Recently, the Pew Research Center found that more than a quarter of adults earning less than \$30,000 annually are completely dependent on smartphones for internet access (Anderson and Kumar).

blues and depression vs. Her Embolism. Every woman has her own journey. #ThisMama #ThanksSerena” (A. Williams 2018). Like her predecessors, Williams’s social media writing seems to build community and voice what is unsaid. Williams uses social media (Facebook, Instagram) to document, share, and explore this identity.

Social media’s ability to spread knowledge harkens to rhetorical strategies like those employed by women in the Obama White House. Women in the White House found that their perspectives were often ignored or unshared, so whenever one woman made a point, other women would repeat, reiterate, or build on the first woman’s point. They called this strategy “amplification” (Eilperin). In fact, social media is made for amplification with ‘retweeting’ and ‘sharing.’ Digital rhetorical scholars Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss call this phenomenon rhetorical velocity, or “a conscious rhetorical concern for distance, travel, speed, and time, pertaining specifically to theorizing instances of strategic appropriation by a third party.” That is, Williams composes posts for Twitter expressly to share and amplify her messages about Black motherhood. Williams provides a platform for other mothers of color to share their knowledge and expertise with her and her followers. Scholar and PR specialist Genevieve Bosah (2018) points out on Twitter the connections Serena Williams is making by publicizing her story: “While she is not the first high profile athlete to give birth (and won’t be the last) #ThisMama #SerenaWilliams is using her platform to reach out to other moms and working moms. By sharing her experiences and her struggles, she is uniting women on and off the court.” Black women see Williams’s struggles and amplify her experiences to raise awareness, the epitome of feminist mothering.

Williams facilitates rhetorical velocity or amplification by using the hashtag #ThisMama. While not a new hashtag, Williams revitalized #ThisMama to build community.⁴ In one of her first tweets using the hashtag, Williams tells the story of Olympia vomiting on an airplane with a photo of the two of them in a narrow alley Williams’s leg up, framing a tired looking Olympia in a stroller. She then expressly calls for other women to share: “#ThisMama would love to hear your stories of motherhood.. even ones like this! Share and tag them with #ThisMama” (Williams 2018b). Perhaps due to William’s request for amplification, the tweet received 5,577 retweets and 49,859 likes. Similarly, Williams reached out to her followers to see if they had similar struggles with infant medical care:

⁴ Kim Wong-Shing, writing for web magazine *Little Things*, credits Serena Williams with starting #ThisMama. The hashtag was used as early as January 2016 by @LesieliKatoa.

Olympia had her one year check up and she has been super clingy ever since #thismama wants to know if this is normal? I mean I kinda liked it she wanted to be by my side ALLLL day but she cried whenever I left her even just to go to the bathroom (Williams 2018f).

On its surface, #ThisMama seems like an empowered and authentic way to call out dominant discourses on motherhood. This tweet received 611 retweets, over 13,000 likes, 1,600 responses, and treatment from the *Today Show* (Tate 2018). Some responses by her followers simply offered well-wishes, but others offered more substantial support such as one commenter, @bridgetmcgann, who commented, "This is not only normal, but an important measure of healthy development. I used to actually work in a lab where we tested this ... Google 'attachment theory'" (Williams 2018f). Other Williams followers retweeted, liked, and responded to @bridgetmcgann's response and shared their knowledge with other people on Twitter who may not follow Serena Williams.

Williams cross-posts and shares across platform adding to her rhetorical velocity and ability to share feminist mothering. The strategy is typical of many celebrities, but Williams's approach is unique because she uses multiple platforms to counter dominant narratives that motherhood is always a joyous affair. In this cross-post from Instagram, Williams exceeds Twitter's character limit to tell the full story of postpartum depression. At the end of her post, Williams encourages her followers, "I am here to say: if you are having a rough day or week—it's ok—I am, too!!! There's always tomm!" (Williams 2018c). In other words, by sharing her authentic, imperfect motherhood, Williams provides discursive space for other women, particularly those of color, to share their maternal challenges.

Feminist Mothering Complicated

Sharing her maternal challenges may be part of a larger social movement, new momism, characterized by a rejection of old tropes surrounding motherhood in which mothers are perfect angels of the house. In *The Mommy Myth*, Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels (2004) explain the inherent paradox in new momism: "Central to new momism, in fact, is the feminist insistence that women have choices, that they are active agents in control of their own destiny, that they have autonomy ... The only truly enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves, first that you are a 'real' woman, and second that you are a decent worthy one, is to become a 'mom'" (5). In Haskell's 2018 *Vogue* piece, Williams states: "'Sometimes I get really down and feel like, Man, I can't do this,'" she says. "It's that same negative attitude I have on the court sometimes. I guess

that's just who I am. No one talks about the low moments—the pressure you feel, the incredible letdown every time you hear the baby cry.” She acknowledges what every mother has felt, helplessness and fear. However, while rejecting perfectionism, new momism carries its own poison pill, that nothing can be as fulfilling as motherhood. Women have choices, but for new momism, the choice should always be motherhood. Williams voices this tension: “To be honest, there's something really attractive about the idea of moving to San Francisco and just being a mom” (Haskell 2018). She Tweets this tenant of new momism too: “This Mama Was going out for me time. Some much needed Serena time... but she threw up in my shoe... I stayed home to make sure she's ok. #momlife #thismama” (Williams 2018h). In other words, for a good mom, “me time” takes a back seat to the baby's needs.

Despite or perhaps because of the pressures of new momism, Williams prioritizes her career.

She wants to prove that she's the greatest tennis player by winning more Grand Slams than Australian women's champion Margaret Court, whom she trails by one: “Maybe this goes without saying, but it needs to be said in a powerful way: I absolutely want more Grand Slams” (Haskell 2018). But again, her success is tied to her new identity as a mother, a typical move in new momism:

I think having a baby might help. When I'm too anxious I lose matches, and I feel like a lot of that anxiety disappeared when Olympia was born. Knowing I've got this beautiful baby to go home to makes me feel like I don't have to play another match. I don't need the money or the titles or the prestige. I want them, but I don't need them. That's a different feeling for me' (Haskell 2018).

For Williams, Olympia becomes an asset to her career rather than a liability. Nevertheless, Williams's profile piece in *Vogue* typifies the celebrity mom profile because they “resurrect so many of the stereotypes about women we hoped to deep six thirty years ago: women are, by genetic composition, nurturing and maternal, love all children, and prefer motherhood to anything” (Douglas and Michaels 2004, 138). Under new momism, the feminist mother can have it all – autonomy, agency, and authenticity. For celebrity mothers with cooks, cleaners, and dieticians, mommyism is achievable.

However, Williams' use of maternal rhetoric is not completely altruistic. Her hashtag and cross-platform posts most frequently promote her brand and other brands with unsavory reputations. Motherhood, it seems, is another identity in which Williams can turn the machine of capitalism to her advantage.

Williams announces her return to tennis after having her daughter using #ThisMama, but does so with her sponsor, JPMorgan Chase. #ThisMama was designed in conjunction with Chase as a marketing ploy: "The JPMorgan campaign is an attempt to reflect both the diversity and complexity of the motherhood experience ... #ThisMama is a great example of reframing the cultural narrative of motherhood as a source of strength for working mothers" (Timsit 2018). On one hand, this campaign is an incredible testament to Williams's empowered mothering because she "can affect social change, both in the home through feminist childrearing and outside the home through maternal activism" (O'Reilly 2008, 799). On the other hand, when we understand feminism as "committed to challenging and transforming this gender inequity in all its manifestations" (O'Reilly 800), including economic inequality, the leveraging maternal rhetoric to benefit Chase, and Williams falls short of true activism.⁵

Moreover, Williams uses maternal rhetoric on social media to market her clothing brand. She uses a non-branded hashtag, #momlife, to share her brand with her followers: "Went to bed around 10:30. Woke up at midnight. Worked on @ShopSerena brand until 4am. Thought I would sleep in and @OlympiaOhanian woke me up at 7am. #momlife #designerlife I'm tired. But gotta get back to work" (Williams 2019). Again, Williams showcases the real struggle of working mothers who often go without sleep for the benefit of their children. Arguably, her tweet draws attention to the plight of many Black women across this country who never had the luxury of idealized motherhood in which bourgeois white women could stay home with their children (hooks 1984, Hills-Collins 1991).

Perhaps the most significant problem in Williams's feminist mothering is her extensive ties to Nike. Besides Nike's historic exploitation of labor across the globe (which they have admittedly improved over the years), Nike has had ongoing difficulty with many of its women athletes. For instance, Alysia Montaño, who gained national attention as the "pregnant runner" for competing in women's 800 meters at the 2014 US Track and Field Championships while nearly eight months pregnant, recently broke her silence on Nike's bullying tactics in contracting with women athletes. In her op-ed for the *New York Times*, Montaño argued, "On Mother's Day this year, Nike released a video promoting gender equality. But that's just advertising" (Montaño 2019). She describes the experience of several track and field women athletes who cannot take a break for pregnancy and have been pressured to avoid pregnancy. Similarly, other

⁵ Motherwork is unpaid and unappreciated traditionally. Seemingly, Williams found a way to monetize motherwork through this partnership with JPMorgan Chase.

women athletes have reported pressure from Nike to lose weight – in some cases to the detriment of their athletic prowess (Chappell 2019). In response to this publicity, Nike changed its policy regarding pregnant athletes, but the company's ties to child labor and sweatshops overseas make this partnership problematic.

Something's Got to Give

Since the celebrity profile and activism surrounding birth mortality, Williams has continued her advocacy for women and mothers. She remains a UNICEF ambassador. She invested in Angel City Football Club, a National Women's Soccer League, and named Olympia as part owner (Betancourt 2020). Mostly, Williams uses her Twitter platform to showcase how much Olympia shapes her experiences as a mother, athlete, and professional: "I agree wholeheartedly. Olympia has been my greatest teacher" (Williams 2022). Journalists, writers, and other mother activists amplify Williams: "'After we play a match we have to go home and still change diapers' -Serena Williams speaking about the 9 moms in the US Open draw this year #USOpen #momlife" (O'Connell 2020). The groundbreaking three mothers in the 2020 US Open epitomizes feminist mothering. These world-class athletes can use their celebrity status to bring awareness to women's social problems and demonstrate that motherhood does not mean the end of one's career. Moreover, platforms like Twitter allow them to control messaging, advertising, and stories about their bodies.

Nevertheless, in Summer 2022, Williams announced her retirement from tennis – short of her Grand Slam goals. Her decision to retire is explicitly linked to the physical limitations of birthing more children:

I never wanted to have to choose between tennis and a family. I don't think it's fair. If I were a guy, I wouldn't be writing this because I'd be out there playing and winning while my wife was doing the physical labor of expanding our family ... I almost did do the impossible: A lot of people don't realize that I was two months pregnant when I won the Australian Open in 2017. But I'm turning 41 this month, and something's got to give. (Haskell 2022).

Perhaps in a new way, Williams is rejecting new momism. At some point, pregnancy, age, and peak athletic performance may not reside in the same body. Williams's vulnerability and authenticity at this moment may provide other women the courage to accept that everything has limits. She can put her energy into developing her brand instead of her tennis serve.

Despite her retirement from tennis, Williams will continue working. Her business, Serena Ventures, has raised over \$100 million in outside financing with a portfolio of over 75% of those ventures owned by women and people of color (Haskell 2022). Williams is not content to suffer in silence; she uses her substantial celebrity to bring awareness to a terrible racial bias that places Black women in peril whenever and wherever they give birth. As she states in her op-ed about Black maternal mortality: “Every mother, everywhere, regardless of race or background deserves to have a healthy pregnancy ... Together, we can make this change. Together, we can be the change” (Williams 2018i). She leverages the power of Twitter and her nearly eleven million followers to showcase her personal health complications, struggle with postpartum depression, and the challenges of motherhood. And, in the end, Williams is a feminist mother.

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