

Mark Knight is Our Best Tabloid Cartoonist. Is His Serena Williams Drawing Racist?

Is the Mark Knight cartoon of Serena Williams racist? It depends on where you sit.

Let me start with three opinions:

I have long thought Mark Knight the best and most intelligent tabloid cartoonist in Australia.

I find it inconceivable that he deliberately sat down to draw a racist cartoon and accept his [explanation of purpose](#) at face value.

Race is a real, if second order, category in how most people will assimilate the image of Williams; it is not “not there”.

I can imagine an Australian past when this cartoon, which shows Williams jumping on her racquet with a dummy on the ground, would have been less controversial. Williams has been dominant long enough that she might well have thrown a similar tantrum, say, in the 2002 Australian Open. Had she done so, the same cartoon would probably have passed with little comment.

The Herald Sun sold more copies then, but it only circulated in Victoria, and Australian sensitivity specifically to racism against African Americans was (and possibly still is) too weak for that aspect of the image to loom large. As I said, race is not “not there”, but neither is it, in my view, “the point”.

But here’s the rub: in the endless passion play of US culture, there is no way the cartoon will now be read as [non-racist in](#)

[the US](#) and, therefore, internationally.

An artist's intention cannot control the way images circulate any more. This isn't exactly new, but the instant circulation of everything has put the risk of offence being taken on steroids.

My guess is that J.K. Rowling is not a regular reader of the Herald Sun, but Twitter can shear off the context and deliver the cartoon to her for comment.

Well done on reducing one of the greatest sportswomen alive to racist and sexist tropes and turning a second great sportswoman into a faceless prop. <https://t.co/Y0xVMuTXEC>

– J.K. Rowling (@jkr_rowling) [September 10, 2018](#)

Cartoonists have to compress their images, so they often use stereotypes. This objectifies the subject and is thus, inevitably, an othering process. That is how representation works in general and how satirical representation works in particular.

You just cannot draw Serena Williams without drawing her female and black. So should she never be drawn? Even when she has plainly made herself a topic of interest in a very public way? Is silence better than risk of offence?

The National Association of Black Journalists has accused Knight's depiction of being ["unnecessarily sambo-like"](#). They certainly have a point, particularly about Williams' hair and lips, which could have been drawn more demurely without loss of fidelity. On the other hand, those who comment on Naomi Osaka being depicted as ["a petite blonde"](#) seem to miss that her skin tone is almost identical in the cartoon to Williams'.

So, is there any way of drawing an angry and powerful African-American woman and quarantining the image from old racist

stereotypes? Should Knight just not have gone there? By all means make up your own mind.

The problem is that balance and restraint are not what we want from our satirists. Cartoonists often draw to probe and offend. Otherwise they would just be freelance marketers of positive images. If they do offend, however, they have to live with the criticisms, or they are demanding a standard they do not themselves apply.

Cartoons should generate a robust exchange of views on matters of public significance. It's an exchange where the Hippocratic Oath of "first do no harm" cannot reign supreme without undermining the free circulation of ideas, images, and opinions.

Mark Knight should not be muzzled but he has to cop it sweet from those who dislike the cartoon. He does not work in a safe environment, where all he will hear is the gentle murmuring of affirmation. Neither do public figures like Serena Williams.

So, my last opinion: given the current configuration of digital media, there's no way this safe environment is about to arrive, and I hope it never does.

—

[Robert Phiddian](#), Professor of English, [Flinders University](#). This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

[Image Credit: Jason Szenes]