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**THE ARSENALISATION OF SPACE:
*THE IMAGINED COMMUNITY OF A
FOOTBALL CLUB***

William Sidnam

Auckland, New Zealand
Email: wsid006@aucklanduni.ac.nz

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between the fan community of Arsenal Football Club and time-space distanciation. Since the end of European imperialism, the English football club has been quietly colonising the minds of spectators everywhere, introducing them to cultural forms that had once been unique to England. Now a global phenomenon, the North London club has an estimated 113 million fans worldwide. Using Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined community," I analyse the conditions that have enabled fans from Lagos to Los Angeles, and from Beijing to Bangalore, to identify with a sporting institution based in a country they may have never visited. To explore the paradoxes of this long-distance relationship, this article analyses information about Arsenal that appeared in newspapers, blogs, and social media websites from 2004 to 2014. The study concludes that, with the advent of digital technologies, Arsenal is simultaneously embedded in English culture and accessible to the millions of fans living in the interminable spaces beyond its country's borders. In an age marked by constant social and technological change, fans find in the football club a universal community capable of contributing to their sense of ontological security.

Keywords: imagined community, identity, football fandom, Arsenal, time-space distanciation, mediated experience, liquid society, globalisation

Introduction

When Suleiman Omondi came home from the pub on 5th May 2009, he tied a rope around his neck and hanged himself.¹ Earlier that evening the twenty-nine year old Arsenal fan had been watching his team take on Manchester United F.C. in the semi-final second-leg of the UEFA Champions League. When it became clear that Arsenal F.C. would not qualify for the European cup final, Omondi “broke down,” and in a fit of despair, went home to end his life.²

The tragic tale of Suleiman Omondi may well be remembered as an extreme case of fan identification; that a fan would lay down his life for his sports team is a troubling example of how consumers can take leisure pursuits so seriously as to end up being consumed by them. When Omondi carried out his final act of human agency, he was “still dressed in an Arsenal shirt.”³ The police who found his body the next day did not treat his death as suspicious: “What we are gathering is this suicide is related to the Arsenal and Manchester match.”⁴ But speaking to journalists, the man who made the quote was nowhere near London, where the match had taken place. As Police Chief of Embakasi, David Bunei was speaking about a

¹ “Kenyan Arsenal fan hangs himself,” *BBC News*, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8036367.stm>.

² “Kenyan Arsenal fan hangs himself.”

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ “Arsenal fan hangs himself after Manchester United defeat,” *The Independent*, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/news-and-comment/arsenal-fan-hangs-himself-after-manchester-united-defeat-1680088.html>.

tragedy that took place not in England, but on a different continent entirely – in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi.

The case of Suleiman Omondi lies at the heart of this paper, whose main concern can be summarised thus: How has a football club based in North London become one of the world's most celebrated sports teams? In my search I draw upon the ideas of Benedict Anderson, Anthony Giddens, and Zygmunt Bauman, using them to help explain how Arsenal fandom has taken on an international flavour. And in the second half of this paper, I contemplate the reasons why fans would follow a football club like Arsenal in the first place. I thereby seek to uncover the conditions needed for fans to be able to become intensely passionate about a football club, however many tens or hundreds or thousands of kilometres they may live from it.

The Imagined Community of Arsenal F.C.

The last two decades have seen English football assume a position of preeminence in the world of entertainment. Ever since the Premier League was established in 1992 as England's top division of men's football, English football has become an internationally marketable commodity. As one of the most successful clubs in the country, with 13 top division league trophies and 12 FA Cups,⁵ Arsenal F.C. is a case in point. Since its founding

⁵ "Honours," Arsenal, accessed June 6, 2015, <http://www.arsenal.com/first-team/honours>.

in 1886,⁶ Arsenal has become an international institution: a 2011 survey found that Arsenal is the fifth most popular club in the world, with a fanbase estimated at 113 million.⁷ By this reckoning, were Arsenal a country, it would be the world's twelfth most populated,⁸ slightly smaller than Mexico. Needless to say, more than one in every 100 people living on the earth today would be a *Gooner*, the colloquial term for Arsenal fan.⁹

To understand how the population of the *Arsenal Empire*¹⁰ could be twice that of England,¹¹ it would be instructive to consider Benedict Anderson's conception of nation, namely, as *imagined community*: "It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."¹² Although Anderson had a nation-state in

⁶ "Laying the Foundations - Overview," *Arsenal*, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://www.arsenal.com/history/laying-the-foundations/laying-the-foundations-overview>.

⁷ Dammian Mannion, "The world's most popular football club revealed: Man United, Liverpool, Arsenal, Barca, Real or Chelsea?" *Talksport*, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://talksport.com/magazine/big-picture/2011-10-13/worlds-most-popular-football-club-revealed-man-united-liverpool-arsenal-barca-real-or-chelsea>.

⁸ "Country Rank," *United States Census Bureau*, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://www.census.gov/population/international/data/countryrank/rank.php>.

⁹ At the time of writing (13:48 NZT on 16th September 2014), the United States Census Bureau estimated the world's population at 7.192 billion. (113 million / 7.192 billion)*100 = 1.57 (3 s.f.)

¹⁰ We will use the term "Arsenal Empire" to denote the overall community of Arsenal supporters.

¹¹ According to the 2011 UK Census, England had a population of 53 million. "2011 Census, Population and Household Estimates for England and Wales," *Office for National Statistics*, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/population-and-household-estimates-for-england-and-wales/index.html>.

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* London: Verso, 1991, p. 6.

mind when he came up with the *imagined community*, it is worth applying the concept to football clubs like Arsenal, whose community does resemble a nation in certain respects. Like nations, Arsenal is a group of individuals, all of whom embody what Émile Durkheim calls a *collective conscience*: however fervent they may be in their support of Arsenal, Gooners know “in their hearts” that whenever Arsenal is playing, there are others like them who are cheering on the team.

But whilst nations are limited by physical boundaries, which determine who is living in the nation at a given moment, and thus who *isn't*, football clubs have no geographical frontiers to speak of. With more than half of its supporters residing outside of England, it can be said that Arsenal is inherently multicultural. If multiculturalism expresses the idea of a society containing several cultures, then Arsenal, with a community so large and containing so many multitudes,¹³ could not possibly be reduced to a single culture. In his analysis of Celtic FC, Neil Conner notes that the “collective identities of deterritorialized transnational groups of sports fans from around the world [...] are composed of members containing assorted nationalities, ethnicities, religious beliefs and other identities...”¹⁴ These units, which are capable of defining who we are in relation to others, are what David Harvey would call *spaces*

¹³ cf. Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855).

¹⁴ Neil Conner, “Global cultural flows and the routes of identity: the imagined worlds of Celtic FC,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 15, no. 5 (2014): 529, doi:10.1080/14649365.2014.908233.

of *individuation*¹⁵ and account for the diversity of the Arsenal community. Indeed, in the same company as the Kenyans watching the Arsenal-Manchester United match in a Nairobi pub are such well-known figures as Queen Elizabeth II,¹⁶ François Hollande,¹⁷ and Fidel Castro.¹⁸ That an English monarchist, a French republican, and a Cuban communist could belong to the same community attests to the inclusive nature of the Arsenal Empire. Although each one inhabits a different political worldview, they nonetheless share at least one space of individuation in common: a love of Arsenal.

Given the spaces of individuation that fans of football clubs can occupy, Conner disagrees with describing clubs using Anderson's concept, which he believes is "both limited by its geographic scale and its intended purpose."¹⁹ In his view, the term "imagined communities" should only be used when examining "collective identification to a particular place" or "pertaining to nationalism or national identity."²⁰ But in the case of football clubs

¹⁵ David Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity*. Oxford, and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1989, p. 302.

¹⁶ Kevin Stott, "EPL: 10 Famous Fans of Arsenal," *Bleacher Report*, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/1109401-epl-10-famous-fans-of-arsenal/>.

¹⁷ Charles Leonard, "'It's not just football - it's like a religion'," *Mail & Guardian*, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-09-18-its-not-just-football-its-like-a-religion>.

¹⁸ Kevin Stott, "EPL: 10 Famous Fans of Arsenal."

¹⁹ Neil Conner, "Global cultural flows and the routes of identity: the imagined worlds of Celtic FC," *Social & Cultural Geography* 15, no. 5 (2014): 529, doi:10.1080/14649365.2014.908233.

²⁰ Neil Conner, "Global cultural flows and the routes of identity: the imagined worlds of Celtic FC," 529.

with fans living everywhere, he prefers to use Appadurai's concept of "imagined worlds" on the grounds that

[t]his approach not only extends upon Anderson's 'imagined communities' to cover the deterritorialized groupings described above, but it also incorporates elements from Cohen's 'symbolic construction of community,' including the ability to envision the communal aspects associated with fandom and its relationship to a place-based sports team as being fluid rather than static.²¹

While I agree that Anderson's concept was originally intended to describe nation-states, I believe that Conner here underestimates just how fluid the symbols that help construct the nation-state as imagined community really are.²² Because imagined communities are abstractions formed in the imagination, their borders are inherently ambiguous. Even if a country like New Zealand has clearly defined borders that separate it from other countries, to say that it ends at the Pacific Ocean would exclude the estimated 600,000 New Zealanders who may still imagine themselves belonging to the nation, despite living beyond its shores.²³ In other words, while New Zealand's borders may have helped ferment their sense of national identity, leaving Aotearoa does not necessarily

²¹ Ibid.

²² See Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Life* (2005) for more on the fluid nature of 21st century communities.

²³ "At least 1 million New Zealanders live overseas," *Statistics New Zealand*, accessed January 3, 2015. http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/population/mythbusters/1million-kiwis-live-overseas.aspx.

cause them to renounce their New Zealandness; on the contrary, the feelings of Kiwi expatriates may yet be stirred upon seeing, say, the national flag, which represents for them the country they have left behind. Put another way, even if New Zealand expatriates are not counted as part of the country's population, they nonetheless *feel* part of it. Since Anderson's concept can be easily extended upon, since it deals with the imagination, which is more abstract and less concerned with precision compared to empirical reality,²⁴ I see no major distinction between a modified version of his concept and Appadurai's. To my mind, Arsenal qualifies as an imagined community insofar as Gooners consider themselves as such;²⁵ the question as to whether Arsenal should be called an *imagined community* or an *imagined world* should matter less than how such a community has arisen in the first place.

Football Fandom in an Increasingly Interconnected World

The globalisation of Arsenal fandom is a product of what Anthony Giddens calls the *mediated experience*: “the involvement

²⁴ Tony Blackshaw (2008) points out that the term “imagined community” is somewhat oxymoronic (p. 330): “it is a conceptual contradiction in terms because it is difficult to tell what is ‘real’ and what is not, and what is swinging in the hammock of imaginative supposition strung between the two parts.” Modern football fans are likewise “conceptual contradictions” because all it takes for them to become fans is to imagine they are so. Ergo: I think therefore I am. Blackshaw, Tony. 2008. “Contemporary community theory and football.” *Soccer & Society* 9, no. 3: 325-345. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost. Accessed November 24, 2014.

²⁵ Even Twitter, the online social networking service, has been identified as an imagined community: Anatoliy Gruzd, Barry Wellman and Yuri Takhteyev, “Imagining Twitter as an Imagined Community,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 55, no. 10 (2011): 1294-1318. doi: 10.1177/0002764211409378.

of temporally/spatially distant influences with human sensory experience.”²⁶ The existence of modern consumer technology means that spectators are able to catch a glimpse of events taking place beyond their immediate surroundings. With high-definition cameras filming matches as they unfold in real time, and satellites beaming the footage to televisions and computers around the world, football fans who are not in the stadium physically, can still experience being there vicariously, through the lens of the camera. This ability to “stay in touch with the action” via digital technologies is what FIFA has termed the *Global Stadium*.²⁷ During the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, FIFA’s Director of Communications & Public Affairs, Walter De Gregorio, suggested that the “social, online, and mobile hub” enables “billions of fans [to] join in and share [the] excitement.”²⁸

De Gregorio's remark encapsulates Giddens's concept of the “phantasmagoric” place, which the British sociologist claims exists in “modern” societies as a result of *time-space distancing*. Giddens argues that in modern societies, which are marked by such dimensions as industrialisation and capitalism,²⁹ time and space are not tied inextricably together as they are in pre-modern societies,

²⁶ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, p. 243.

²⁷ “FIFA’s Global Stadium opens for #WorldCup fans to #Joinin biggest conversation in history,” *FIFA*, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://www.fifa.com/worldcup/news/y=2014/m=5/news=fifa-s-global-stadium-opens-for-worldcup-fans-to-joinin-biggest-conver-2345354.html>.

²⁸ “FIFA’s Global Stadium opens for #WorldCup fans to #Joinin biggest conversation in history.”

²⁹ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 15.

where clearly defined physical boundaries delineate exactly where social activity can take place.³⁰ As he explains,

[the] advent of modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between “absent” others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction. In conditions of modernity, place becomes increasingly phantasmagoric: that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them. What structures the locale is not simply that which is present on the scene; the “visible form” of the locale conceals the distanced relations which determine its nature.³¹

At the crux of his argument is the idea that one can transform a given place without necessarily being in it. The fact that a place may be 70,000 fathoms³² away does not necessarily preclude one from interacting with it in real time. Since space and time are not “bound up”, fans who would normally travel for hours to get to the match ground, can now watch the match unfold in real time on television, saving them the hassle of making a potentially costly trip. Manuel Castells argues in his *The Rise of the Network Society* that people can maintain distance relationships by making use of

³⁰ See Tiest Sondaal, *Football's globalization or globalization? The lessons of Liverpool Football Club's evolution in the Premier League era* (2013) for an analysis of the globalization of one of Arsenal's northern rivals. Sondaal, Tiest. “Football's globalization or globalization? The lessons of Liverpool Football Club's evolution in the Premier League era.” *Soccer & Society* 14, no. 4: 485-501. doi: 10.1080/14660970.2013.810432.

³¹ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, p. 18, my emphasis.

³² cf. Soren Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way* (1845).

what he calls the *space of flows*, which he describes as “purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequences of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors in the economic, political, and symbolic structures of society.”³³ Made possible by “a circuit of electronic impulses,”³⁴ the space of flows is a description of the digital network that individuals use to transmit information to each other over land and sea. If a place can be defined as “a locale whose form, function and meaning are self-contained within the boundaries of physical contiguity,”³⁵ then individuals, who are always residing in a place at any given moment, may partake in another by means of the space of flows most relevant in the present age, namely, television and the Internet.

At the start of the third millennium, the broadcasting of football matches via digital mediums means that the stadium is no longer a “place” as Castells would have it. Where the stadium used to be a self-contained unit whose physical confines dictated who could appreciate the visual spectacle taking place within it, the modern stadium is largely “transparent”: anyone who watches a digital broadcast of the match can access the match experience, which in earlier times had been the privilege of ticket-holders. Therefore we may say that, in a certain sense, Arsenal’s Emirates Stadium exists twice: like Jerusalem, which exists both on earth and in heaven, the Emirates is both in the North London suburb of

³³ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*. Cambridge & Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. 412.

³⁴ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, p. 415.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 423.

Holloway, and wherever fans are watching an Arsenal home match on television. Though fixed to its geographical location, Emirates Stadium can appear, on rectangular screens, in millions of places at once.

This is not to suggest that watching matches via the space of flows is in any way identical to attending games in the stadium, however. Certain match experiences remain the preserve of those present in the stadium: television viewers cannot, for instance, smell the grass or shout messages that players on the pitch could potentially hear. As Edensor and Milington assert, on matchday, the stadium possesses an *atmosphere* – that most intangible of things that, to all intents and purposes, cannot be found elsewhere.³⁶ Having said this, even if the relationship between television viewers and the stadium is asymmetrical insofar as television viewers can see stadium attendees but not vice versa, it is not as if the former cannot shape the actions of the latter. Though virtually invisible, the television audience's presence is most evidently seen in the organising of match schedules. The Premier League is known to have matches kick-off at times most suitable to British and overseas audiences;³⁷ in short, *when* people file into Emirates stadium to

³⁶ Tim Edensor and Steve Milington, "Going to the Match: The Transformation of the Match-day Routine at Manchester City FC," in *Stadium Worlds: Football, space and the built environment*, eds. Sybille Frank and Silke Steets. Milton Park, Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 156.

³⁷ Linda Yueh, "Exporting football. Why does the world love the English Premier League?" *BBC News*, accessed September 30, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-27369580>.

watch Arsenal in action depends partly on *when* foreign audiences are best able to watch the match.

What it Means to be a Gooner

That an English institution would be followed by so many non-English people illustrates the paradox of time-space distancing: even if one does not live within English borders, or know anything about English culture, one may still have an intense relationship with a football club that is deeply embedded in the nation's heritage. The club's official website offers evidence of the club's global appeal, boasting of having more than 124 officially recognised "supporters' clubs" in more than 62 countries.³⁸ Arsenal grants members of the Arsenal Supporters' Clubs "extranet" such privileges as the ability to meet Arsenal representatives and tour Emirates Stadium outside of the normal tour hours.³⁹ Outside of the supporters' clubs, however, millions of Gooners "like" Arsenal's official Facebook page, which contains posts written by fans in languages like Arabic, Persian, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Thai. The linguistic and cultural diversity of Gooners suggests that Arsenal is a new kind of empire; but unlike the European imperialists of old, the club does not conquer far-off lands and peoples by means of violence. In fact, clubs simply cannot "colonise" everyone inhabiting a particular area, so much as hope to "colonise the minds" of a diffuse scattering of individuals who happen to take an

³⁸ "Arsenal Supporters' Clubs," *Arsenal*, accessed October 4, 2014, <http://www.arsenal.com/fanzone/arsenal-supporters-clubs>.

³⁹ "Get involved!" *Arsenal*, accessed October 4, 2014, <http://www.arsenal.com/supportersclubs/setting-up-your-own-club>.

interest in football. While the sun has long since set on the British Empire, the Arsenal Empire girdles the world, its subjects submitting to it not out of coercion, but of choice.

What holds intact the collective identity of Gooners, who share no spaces of individuation in common aside from, obviously, their support for Arsenal, is the knowledge of who *doesn't* support the team. As Eric Hobsbawm observes about ethnicity in a world where nothing is unchangeable, "Increasingly one's identity [has] to be constructed by insisting on the non-identity of others."⁴⁰ For Gooners to know who constitutes "us", they must identify "them", which means that being a Gooner is simply a matter of *not being a non-Gooner*. Because of their vast differences, the way for Gooners to mark themselves out categorically from everyone else, whether in the football firmament or in the real world, is to base their collective identity on following Arsenal – which, of course, most people in the world do not do. As George Simmel notes, "large masses can always be animated and guided by *simple* ideas: what is common to many must be accessible even to the lowest and most primitive among them."⁴¹ However strained this idea of defining collective identity by the process of elimination may seem, it is the only practical way for members of the Arsenal community to create a semblance of unity.

⁴⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*. London: Michael Joseph, 1994, p. 428.

⁴¹ Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1950, p. 93, author's italics.

Unsurprisingly, the Other is usually identified with rival football clubs, which compete with Arsenal for trophies and the signatures of football players. Although these clubs are themselves heterogeneous, they all share the distinction of not being Arsenal. As Emmanuel Levinas reasons, the Other is distinct from the group in question “not because of the Other’s character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the Other’s very alterity.”⁴² But while all non-Arsenal football clubs are Others, some football clubs are more “otherish” than others. Neighbouring clubs, for instance, tend to be treated with superior hostility. According to a survey conducted between August 2012 and February 2013, Arsenal fans consider Tottenham Hotspur as their largest rival,⁴³ which is perhaps based on the fact that the clubs occupy a similar geographical area in North London. Arsenal’s former stadium in Highbury was separated from Tottenham Hotspur’s White Hart Lane by a mere seven kilometres;⁴⁴ and Holloway, where Arsenal is currently based, literally borders Tottenham Hotspur’s home borough of Haringey. That Arsenal fans would “other” the club down the road is evidence of their extreme topophilia, their love for their club and its surroundings translating into a demonisation of a club whose surroundings are almost geographically and culturally identical to their own. When a reporter stopped various male

⁴² Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand. Oxford; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1989, p. 48.

⁴³ “2012-13 Football Rivalry Survey Results,” The Chris Whiting Show, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://thechriswhitingshow.wordpress.com/2012/08/28/2012-football-rivalry-census-results/>.

⁴⁴ “Distance Calculator,” *DistancesFrom.com*, accessed October 11, 2014, distancesfrom.com.

Arsenal fans in the street and asked them what they hated about Tottenham, their responses, or at least the ones shown in the video, were decidedly uniform. Almost every fan replied with a variation of “everything,” while one fan described his Spurs counterparts as “animals.”⁴⁵ When the same reporter asked the respondents if they would ever date a Spurs fan, the majority replied “no” or “never”, while one fan opined, “Yeah...then I'll drop them in the river.”⁴⁶ The respondents’ harsh opinions about Tottenham are interesting since they show that fans’ hatred of a team can even impact on such key spaces of individuation as their relationship status. The lengths some fans would go to avoid sleeping with the enemy suggests that football fandom is not simply confined to the realm of entertainment; in the most extreme cases fandom may take priority over amorous love. If “the one” turned out to be a Spurs fan, then some Gooners, it seems, would rather die alone.

By a curious irony, Tottenham Hotspur is disliked even by Arsenal fans who live nowhere near North London. Gooners living in New Zealand expressed their opposition to that other North London club, when on 19th January 2015 ‘Arsenal New Zealand’, a Facebook fan page for Kiwi Gooners, posted an event for an upcoming North London derby and commented, “Who’s coming to watch us smash the scum?”⁴⁷ The 16 people who have signaled their

⁴⁵“REVEALED: Why Arsenal Fans Hate Tottenham,” YouTube video, 2:20, posted by “FTBpro,” January 10, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehg910Wz6jA>.

⁴⁶“REVEALED: Why Arsenal Fans Hate Tottenham.”

⁴⁷ Facebook Inc., “Who’s coming to watch us smash the scum?” *Arsenal New Zealand’s Facebook Page*, accessed January 22, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/ArsenalFansNewZealand/timeline>.

interest in watching the match at The Fox, a sports bar situated in Auckland's Viaduct Harbour, at the ungodly hour of 1:30am on Sunday 8th February 2015⁴⁸ evince the most curious of paradoxes: that localism is capable of going global. Though localism is concerned with the preference that one has for one's *own* area,⁴⁹ it appears that "foreigners" who may have never set foot in that area can nonetheless claim it, or at least an aspect of it, as their own. It is possible that few of the people who approved of the Facebook post even have ever been to North London; yet by disliking Tottenham Hotspur, they introduce the North London turf war to the country most far afield from their home nation as geography allows.

The importation of pro-Arsenal sentiment into virgin territories can be regarded as a form of *patchwork patriotism*: it is a "patchwork" because Arsenal fandom is not an article made of one material, but rather the sewing together of highly diverse individuals; moreover it is "patriotic" because the fondness that the hodgepodge of Arsenal fans has for the football club would normally be reserved for nations. This can be seen in the language adopted by football fans. McHoul and Miller note that sports fans often talk about their club in the first person plural, "we."⁵⁰ What is notable about this linguistic custom is the fact that its use only occurs in a few domains, such as nationality and religion. On 7th

⁴⁸ As of 14.00 NZT on 2nd February 2015.

⁴⁹ "Localism," *Oxford Dictionaries*, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/localism>.

⁵⁰ Toby Miller and Alec McHoul, *Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. London: Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage, 1998, p. 87.

December 2014 Faiz Dholkawala, an Auckland-based Gooner, wrote on his Facebook page, “Chelsea, you rentboys, you still have a lot to learn from The Arsenal if you guys want to go invincible for an entire season. There's a reason we're called The Invincibles and have a golden PL trophy!”⁵¹ That a young man living in New Zealand would describe Arsenal as “we” while engaging in football banter suggests that he sees the club’s players and staff as performing *on his behalf*. On a linguistic level, his kind of “we” can be called a *categorical ‘we’*,⁵² for it reveals that he positions himself within the same category as the club. But because he is not involved in the day-to-day running of the club, he cannot use the *listed ‘we’*,⁵³ which in this case would be reserved for those who kick a ball around the Emirates’ lawn. That being said, the mere fact that he can use the *categorical ‘we’* illustrates just how significant his sense of belonging with the club really is.⁵⁴ As McHoul and Miller note, the world of music does not have this *categorical ‘we’*:⁵⁵ Pink Floyd fans are unlikely to say something like, “We played *Us vs Them* at last night's concert,” because however much they

⁵¹ Faiz Dholkawala’s Facebook page, accessed February 5, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/faiz.dholkawala>.

⁵² Toby Miller and Alec McHoul, *Popular Culture and Everyday Life*, p. 87.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁴ In the same vein, Amir Ben Porat (2010) claims that (p. 280) “through the use of the a categorical ‘we’, fans articulate their image of themselves, in other words their projection of the self.” Accordingly, Dholkawala’s boasting of being called The Invincibles reflects the quality he would presumably like to see in himself, namely, invincibility. By contrast, his derogative assessment of Chelsea as being composed of “rentboys” presumably reflects his distaste for prostitution, be it figurative or otherwise. Ben Porat, Amir. “Football fandom: a bounded identification.” *Soccer & Society* 11, no. 3: 277-290. doi: 10.1080/14660971003619594.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

appreciate their favourite band, music followers “acknowledge their awareness of the distance between themselves as audience and the performer.”⁵⁶

The Consumption of a Football Club

The irony of football fandom is that despite its insistence upon community, it is a characteristically fluid space of individuation: since no one is born with a club’s characteristics inscribed on them, on the subject of which club to support, man is condemned to be free.⁵⁷ Unlike with one’s birth date, one not only can choose a football club, if any at all; one also has the choice to cease supporting it. Since there is no obligation to follow football in the first place, fandom is purely voluntary. As one American fan of Liverpool F.C. puts it, “You *buy into* the history and the tradition, the values of the club.”⁵⁸ From this perspective, football fandom can be seen as a form of consumption. As the consumer ethos posits the view that consumers should buy whatever is in their best interests, fans are free to shop around and “consume” any football club or clubs they wish. Those who desire Arsenal can *buy into* the club, and in so doing undergo a kind of naturalisation that imbues them

⁵⁶ Cornel Sandvoss, *A Game of Two Halves*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 36.

⁵⁷ cf. Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943).

⁵⁸ Alex Williams, “Their Game, Now Ours: Soccer, Particularly England’s Premier League, Growing in New York Creative Circles,” *The New York Times*, my emphasis, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/17/fashion/soccer-particularly-englands-premier-league-growing-in-popularity-in-new-york-creative-circles.html>.

with an identity shared by millions worldwide. To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir, we are not born a Gooner; we become one.

Since Arsenal is a cultural identity that welcomes everyone, then anyone, regardless of nationality, religion, culture, or any other identity-denoting category, can become part of its culture. Much of Arsenal's porosity has to do with the fact that cultures themselves are, for the most part, porous. Gordon Mathews uses the term "cultural supermarket" to express the idea that cultures are not at all like the immutable Forms found in the Platonic heaven. If anything, cultures are commodities to be consumed as one pleases: "[c]learly culture has become in part a matter of personal taste; to a degree, we seem to pick and choose culturally who we are, in the music we listen to, the food we eat, and perhaps even the religion we practice."⁵⁹ Granted, some cultures are more accessible than others: the social world we are born into largely determines what cultural choices we make.⁶⁰ For example, a person born in an English-speaking country where Latin is not widely spoken *could* learn Latin as a second-language; but to become a Latin speaker would require exposure to the Latin language, whose availability cannot always be guaranteed to everyone. Put another way, foreign languages are in the cultural supermarket, but often on the top shelves, beyond the reach of many.

⁵⁹ Gordon Mathews, *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket*. London: Routledge, 2000, p. 5.

⁶⁰ Gordon Mathews, *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket*, p. 5.

By contrast, football fandom is a cultural supermarket's equivalent of a freebie. Consumers need not part with their cash to become Gooners; their fandom is simply a matter of cheering on the team. The lack of barriers to entry means that Arsenal is what Zygmunt Bauman would call *liquid*. Bauman uses the adjective "liquid" to denote a state of precarity⁶¹: that which is liquid "cannot keep its shape or stay on course for long."⁶² Using the liquid metaphor, Zygmunt Bauman claims that one is always in possession of multiple identities, all or most of which are "unfixed" and "volatile."⁶³ Since "one is free to make and unmake identities at will,"⁶⁴ it follows that Arsenal fandom itself is "unfixed" and "volatile": fans can join the club and leave it whenever and from wherever they wish. The club's very "liquidness" also means that fans of Arsenal may also be fans of other football clubs. Nick Hornby, who wrote the bestselling autobiographical novel *Fever Pitch*, which recounts his experiences of following Arsenal from the 1960s to the early 1990s, confessed that upon arriving at Cambridge University in 1977, he became a fan of the local team, Cambridge United. But he insists that while supporting his new club, he remained a devout Gooner:

I was not being unfaithful to Arsenal, because the two teams did not inhabit the same universe. If the two objects of my adoration had ever run up against each other at a party, or a wedding, or another of those awkward social

⁶¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life*, Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2005, p. 2.

⁶² Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life*, p. 1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

situations one tries to avoid whenever possible, they would have been confused: if he loves *us*, whatever does he see in *them*?⁶⁵

As we can see from Hornsby's "dual patriotism," the liquidness of football fandom is both liberating and troublesome. On the one hand, his supporting Cambridge United does not in any way dilute his remarkably obsessive love of Arsenal. As a customer, he can place both clubs in his cultural supermarket trolley without fearing reprisals from either. On the other hand, the blurring of identities makes determining the practical size of the Arsenal Empire all but impossible. If Gooners can support clubs other than Arsenal, they may end up supporting Arsenal's major rivals like Tottenham Hotspur. Were this to be the case, it would mean that some Gooners are, at the same time, non-Gooners. Nevertheless such a statement would fall foul of the law of noncontradiction formulated by Aristotle, who if given the statements "War is peace" and "War is not peace," would argue that at least one of them cannot be right.⁶⁶ Hence for that reason we may suggest that if Gooners cannot also be non-Gooners, then what is not Arsenal is, in its own way, an imagined community. The reason "non-Arsenal" is imagined is because Gooners would imagine fans who support both Arsenal *and* teams that Gooners regard as "not one of them" as being pro-Arsenal and *not being anti-Arsenal*. In the same way that

⁶⁵ Nick Hornby, *Fever Pitch*. London: Penguin Books, 1992, p. 90.

⁶⁶ Laurence Horn, "Contradiction," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed October 13, 2014, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/contradiction/>.

a holder of dual British/French citizenship is regarded by either country as its citizen, despite Britain insisting that it is not France and vice versa, Hornsby may participate in both Arsenal and Cambridge United fandom, because despite his allegiance to a non-Arsenal entity, Arsenal fans would *imagine* that he is *not* in the non-Arsenal community as such.

The Varieties of Consumer Experience

We may suppose that it is this porosity that explains how Arsenal can have as many as 113 million fans. As a cultural freebie, the club welcomes support from fans what we could call *cosmopolitan fans*: those fans who belong to more than one football community at a time. Admitting such fans into the tabernacle is of course self-serving: whether a fan supports one or more teams alongside Arsenal is besides the point, for the more fans the club has, the better. Naturally, this means that even the least committed of fans are entitled to call themselves legitimate club members. In his *Taxonomy of Spectator Identities in Football*, Richard Giulianotti refers to such fans as *flâneurs*.⁶⁷ Named after the urban character that Charles Baudelaire wrote about in the nineteenth century, the football *flâneur* is an aloof stroller who “acquires a postmodern spectator identity through a depersonalized set of market-dominated virtual relationships, particularly interactions

⁶⁷ Richard Giulianotti, “Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flâneurs: A Taxonomy of Spectator Identities in Football,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 26, no. 1 (2002): 38, doi: 10.1177/0193723502261003.

with the cool media of television and the Internet.”⁶⁸ Viewing football as essentially a form of entertainment, the *flâneur* has little time for club loyalty. Strolling around the cultural supermarket, the *flâneur* adds to and subtracts from his trolley whatever club he wills.

Not surprisingly, the *flâneur* is not held highly by serious fans. In modern football speak, the *flâneur* is often known as the “plastic fan”, whose commitment to the cause is derided for being suspect. Writing on an Arsenal fan blog, one anonymous writer likens plastic fans to

the “fair weather fan” or the “I only sing when we are winning” fan. Basically *they* are negative horrible creatures, that really add no.....none zero, value. I am so tired of hearing “oh Giroud is rubbish”, “Arsenal are out of the title race”, “Wenger out”. It is just ridiculous. Plus *they* never have anything nice to say, it is just vicious attacks. If you are going to criticize a player, then have something to back it up not just random statements that make no sense. “Bendtner is better than Giroud” is not a statement that makes any sense. I know that most of *these* fans do not have any real knowledge of the game *they* are watching. Instead *they* have got it from somewhere else.⁶⁹

A remarkable feature of the writer's polemic is its litany of third person plural pronouns. Although a Gooner, the writer constantly uses the word “they”, talking about fellow Gooners as if

⁶⁸ Richard Giulianotti, “Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs: A Taxonomy of Spectator Identities in Football,” 38.

⁶⁹ “The Plastic Fan - It's an Epidemic,” *Arsenal Football 101*, my emphasis, accessed October 13, 2014, www.arsenalfootball101.com/2013/12/the-plastic-fan-its-epidemic.html.

they constituted a separate fanbase. By describing *them* as “negative horrible creatures” who “do not have any real knowledge of the game they are watching,” the author assumes moral and intellectual superiority over members who belong to the same football community as the author does. To the author, a “real” fan is one who supports the team unconditionally; unlike the “fair weather fan” who only supports Arsenal when they are playing well, the “real” fan sticks by the team come rain or shine. This superciliousness on the writer’s part is interesting because it shows that while fans may rally behind their team in unison, as the “us” against the “them,” when their gaze is turned inwards, they do not always see a “we”; what they often see is a ragtag group of fans, whose idea of fandom may well conflict with their own. Hence while all Gooners embody Arsenal’s collective conscience, some claim to embody it more than others.

Arsenal as a Religion

Given the steadfast devotion of many fans, we may argue that in a certain sense, Arsenal is a religion. If we borrow Clifford Geertz’s anthropological definition of religion as a “cultural system,”⁷⁰ our claim need not be contentious. Geertz defines religion as

⁷⁰ Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a cultural system,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 87.

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.⁷¹

By this definition, a religion does not require such attributes as a moral system, or one or more deities, to be considered as such. To the extent that a cultural system inspires in its followers a shared set of beliefs and sentiments, it is a religion. This being so, religions can function not only in the nominally religious world, but also in the profane world. Émile Durkheim argues that, “when a conviction of any strength is held by the same community of men, it inevitably takes on a religious character. It inspires in men's minds the same reverential respect as beliefs which are apparently religious.”⁷² The “moods and motivations” that characterise Gooners are at their most intense during North London derbies, which one lifelong Arsenal fan and poet likens to a religious event: “In the one game I went to... I’m telling you, like, you *feel* it. It’s just a different [...] it’s not like your average game. There is something in the air, and sometimes you can sort of sense what’s going to happen.”⁷³ The atmosphere is at its most intense because both sets of supporters acknowledge the other as their biggest rival. With territorial bragging rights at stake,

⁷¹ Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a cultural system,” p. 90.

⁷² Emile Durkheim, *Selected Writings*. Edited and translated by Anthony Giddens. Cambridge: University Press, 1972., p. 222.

⁷³ ““I Hate Everything About Them” - North London Derby | Derby Days,” YouTube video, 13:23, posted by “Copa90,” October 13, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbHK9Z8tFYw>.

Gooners allow their collective conscience to emanate from their inner selves until it becomes palpable to everyone in the stadium.⁷⁴

Needless to say, Arsenal is not commensurable with those systems of faith practiced by millions of believers around the world. The idea of a football club being in the business of saving souls or providing moral guidelines to live by stretches credibility, especially since many followers of religions identify with Arsenal. In normal circumstances, pursuing a second religion would be anathema for most religious believers, particularly the self-proclaimed children of Abraham, who are forbidden from worshipping “other gods” before their one.⁷⁵ But not everyone who upholds religious exclusivism has scruples with following Arsenal. According to a biographer of Osama bin Laden, the former Saudi-born terrorist who founded the global militant Islamist organisation Al-Qaeda, which claimed responsibility for the September 11 attacks, was a Gooner who attended Arsenal matches at Highbury.⁷⁶ Ironically, before masterminding the downfall of the West, bin Laden cheered on a team whose founding members worked at the Royal Arsenal munitions factory in Woolwich, which during the

⁷⁴ This description of the north London derby atmosphere, which Gooners both create and consume, has an undeniably religious quality about it. To paraphrase William Baker (2007), Gooners “follow their favourite players and [team] as if it were a matter of life and death.” Baker, William. *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 1.

⁷⁵ cf. Exodus 20:3: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”

⁷⁶ Giles Smith, “Osama bin Laden’s Highbury Days,” *The Telegraph*, accessed September 30, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/teams/arsenal/3016918/Osama-bin-Ladens-Highbury-days.html>.

First World War built weapons for the British Army⁷⁷ – which invaded Afghanistan in 2003, seeking to bring him to justice. Evidently, the seemingly solid principle of “he that is not with me is against me,”⁷⁸ insofar as it applies to religion and politics, melts into air; when football is the only criterion, bin Laden may have more in common with the citizens of the “Great Satan,”⁷⁹ his ideological enemies, than with his fellow jihadists, some of whom may be laden with their support for the Red Devils.

That one can be both a football fan and a religious *fanatic*⁸⁰ suggests that although football fandom may contain a quasi-religious atmosphere, it does not go so far as to challenge the legitimacy of religions proper. Having said this, a football club may nonetheless *resemble* a secular religion. A Gooner called Zubair Sayed argues that Arsenal is, essentially, a religion for the irreligious:

You’re talking about religion, and as somebody who is not religious but there’s almost a longing for some sense of belonging – I love football and there is so much about it, there’s the drama and the passion, the whole theatre of genius.... As someone who is an atheist but at times might be struggling for meaning in the world and has work that is quite intense, with civil society and human

⁷⁷ “The Royal Arsenal, Woolwich, London: Munitions Factory,” *BBC*, accessed October 7, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01rjc35>.

⁷⁸ cf. Luke 11:23.

⁷⁹ Kenneth Samples, “Is America Really the “Great Satan”?” *Reasons to Believe*, accessed October 13, 2014, <http://www.reasons.org/blogs/reflections/is-america-really-the-%E2%80%9Cgreat-satan%E2%80%9D>.

⁸⁰ It is worth noting that the term ‘fan’ probably derives from ‘fanaticism.’

rights kind of stuff every day, you know, it is an escape, it is also a global family.⁸¹

Significantly, Sayed's atheism does not prevent him from supporting Arsenal. If anything, it is the South African fan's very irreligiousness, as the term is conventionally understood, that draws him to the club. The fact that he works for a human rights non-governmental organisation⁸² suggests that he has what may be called a moral conscience. But troubled by the world's iniquity, Sayed seeks shelter not through any one of the "traditional" religions, which may offer moral prescriptions to live by, but through a football club. For even if Arsenal cannot defeat evil per se, it may, at the very least, help its followers escape it. Sayed's case serves to illustrate Magdalinski's and Chandler's point, which is that religion "intersects both personal devotion and social and cultural institutions and has a significant impact on the formation of both individual and group identities."⁸³ For though Sayed's "religion" is not one in the traditional sense of the term, he nonetheless shares with other Gooners a personal and subjective relationship to the Arsenal cause.

⁸¹ Charles Leonard, "It's not just a football - it's like a religion," *Mail & Guardian*, accessed October 13, 2014, <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-09-18-its-not-just-football-its-like-a-religion>.

⁸² Charles Leonard, "It's not just a football - it's like a religion."

⁸³ Tara Magdalinski and Timothy Chandler, eds., "With God on their side: an introduction," in *With God on their Side: Sport in the service of religion*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 2.

Collective Identity as a Form of Self-Preservation

It may be said that the yearning for “some sense of belonging” is really an expression of anxiety. Harvey argues that the search for a collective identity is akin to “the search for secure moorings in a shifting world.”⁸⁴ In a world where the only constant is change, where the goalposts are forever being shifted, the need for stability becomes ever more urgent. Hence the reason that people take out lifetime subscriptions with football clubs has much to do with self-preservation. When we no longer recognise the world into which we have been thrust, we may take solace in joining a community that can potentially outlast time. It is in joining such a community that we may allay our anxieties about the direction in which our world is heading. As Corey Robins writes about the Americans that Alexis de Tocqueville encountered in his travels around nineteenth century America: “Theirs was a vague foreboding about the pace of change and the liquefying of common referents. Uncertain about the contours of their world, they sought to fuse themselves with the mass, for only in unity could they find some sense of connection.”⁸⁵

We may claim that these fears are as relevant today as they were in Tocqueville’s time. This “vague foreboding” can be seen in the language of Logan Taylor, a Los Angeles Gooner who sees

⁸⁴ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1989, p. 302.

⁸⁵ Corey Robin, *Fear: the History of a Political Idea*. Oxford: University Press, 2004, p. 75.

Arsenal not just as a football club, but as a cultural heritage to which he has become heir. As he puts it,

I've found this outlet for performing loyalty, perpetuating a legendary verbal history, defending something at times very blindly and feeling pride in something only slightly larger than myself, all the while feeling this great sense of brotherhood and immortality.⁸⁶

Striking a bombastic tone, Taylor likens the club to a community of believers, a “brotherhood” whose members experience a kind of “immortality.” Not surprisingly, his affection for the club extends far beyond the banal. The weekly ritual of going to a Los Angeles pub, where he can watch Arsenal matches with fellow Gooners, makes him feel “thoroughly recharged,”⁸⁷ possibly because it reminds him of where he truly belongs. In his “Taylorist” view, Arsenal is very much a security blanket, a panacea to the anomie of modern-day Los Angeles. Amidst the chaos of the concrete jungle, he sees in Arsenal a home in which to rest. The fact that he lives in California is not a stumbling-block to the believer, for the moment he arrives in the pub, he is reunited with his fraternity, his spiritual family on the earth.

⁸⁶ Sam Blum, “What turns an American into a diehard Arsenal fan? EPL takes root in the US,” *The Guardian*, accessed October 13, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/feb/28/premier-league-epl-nbc-america-fans>.

⁸⁷ Sam Blum, “What turns an American into a diehard Arsenal fan? EPL takes root in the US.”

When Taylor speaks about “perpetuating” the “legendary verbal history” that is Arsenal, he evinces his need to hold onto something that the shackles of time cannot contain. Like the *Logos* that was around in eternity past,⁸⁸ the “word” that is Arsenal’s verbal history predates the current generation of Gooners by a good century, and for that reason has an aura of permanence about it that Taylor finds appealing. As Friedrich Nietzsche asserts in *The Birth of Tragedy*, “a nation, like an individual, is valuable only insofar as it is able to give to quotidian experience the stamp of the eternal. Only by so doing can it express its profound, if unconscious, conviction of the relativity of time and the metaphysical meaning of life.”⁸⁹ As a mortal, Taylor is bound to join the ranks of those who have gone before him; so by aligning himself with Arsenal, Taylor can hold in an hour eternity,⁹⁰ a longing of his heart that nary a tangible could ever fulfil.⁹¹ Aware of the brevity of his life, he keeps the Arsenal flame alight, for it is through it that he achieves a vicarious immortality. As once he has breathed his last and has departed from this world, he will live on, through the club, in the hearts of men.

⁸⁸ cf. John 1:1: “In the beginning was the Word.”

⁸⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golfing, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956, p. 138.

⁹⁰ cf. William Blake: “To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour.”

⁹¹ cf. Ecclesiastes 3:11: “He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

Given these state of affairs, it is not surprising that Taylor would liken the club to his “wife”⁹²: for this most fervent of believers, a sports team takes on the characteristics normally reserved for a soul mate, the counterpart with whom one would hope to spend one’s life. That he derives a state of mind known in Durkheimian terms as *ecstasy*,⁹³ from devoting his life to his beloved “wife” is apparent in the language he uses to evoke “her”. And yet for all his praises of “the one”, whom he first discovered while living in England, Taylor has never been to Arsenal’s homeground, having only ever watched “her” from a distance.⁹⁴ Simply put, he has never met his wife.

And yet the couple’s lack of physical intimacy does not rule out a long-distance relationship. If anything, it is in the Los Angeles pub, with its space of flows, that Taylor and his sweetheart can reaffirm their kinship. Emile Durkheim argues that every community requires the occasional coming together. As he explains, “all forms of political, economic or religious groups are careful to have periodical reunions where their members may revive their common faith by manifesting it in common.”⁹⁵ It is in gatherings that the flock can rekindle its members’ communal spirit. But bearing in mind the immensity of the Arsenal clan, members who cannot enter into the stadium resort to meeting in private homes and

⁹² Blum, *The Guardian*, 2014.

⁹³ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1926, p. 227.

⁹⁴ Sam Blum, “What turns an American into a diehard Arsenal fan? EPL takes root in the US.”

⁹⁵ Emile Durkheim, *Essential Writings*, 1972, p. 230.

pubs, where they may “perpetuate the legendary verbal history” by other means. Watching the television together, Gooners are in the position to sing chants about Arsenal – an action they would seldom perform on their own. However geographically removed from the stadium they may be, the fact that they may sing at the same time as Arsenal fans in the stadium, evokes in them all a semblance of oneness.

For Elias Canetti, the Arsenal supporters' singing songs in unison would constitute what he calls a “rhythmic crowd.”⁹⁶ To his mind, the members of such a mass coordinate their motions so as to create “a specific state of communal excitement.”⁹⁷ Describing the significance of rhythm, Canetti writes:

Every part of a man which can move gains a life of its own and acts as if independent, but the movements are all parallel, the limbs appearing superimposed on each other. They are close together, one often resting on another, and thus density is added to their state of equivalence. Density and equality become one and the same. In the end, there appears to be a single creature dancing, a creature with fifty heads and a hundred legs and arms, all performing in exactly the same way and with the same purpose. When their excitement is at its height, *these people really feel as one*, and nothing but physical exhaustion can stop them.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart. London: Victor Gollancz, 1962, p. 31.

⁹⁷ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, p. 31.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32, my emphasis.

In the same way that the haka evokes in the Maori a “feeling of equality,”⁹⁹ the singing of songs in unison enables Arsenal fans to “be in unison.” Were the fans to move their mouths at the same time and say, “One-nil to the Arsenal,” they would resemble a one hundred million strong behemoth, whose “phantasmagoric” existence would doubtless be more than “slightly larger”¹⁰⁰ than Logan Taylor, were he to sing it alone. The ritual of singing praises to Arsenal thus promotes exclusiveness to the Arsenal cause, for although some Gooners may also support other teams, during the time when they are singing about Arsenal they are, at least outwardly, only supporting one team. It is also in this “chorus” that fans may overcome the anxiety they feel living in the “shifting world.”¹⁰¹ Because they do not stay still while the world is moving, but move at their own will, they do not suffer vertigo, the “dizziness of freedom.”¹⁰² In repeating the ritual before television screens every week, they gain a sense of what Anthony Giddens calls *ontological security*: “a sense of continuity and order in events, including those not directly within the perceptual environment of the individual.”¹⁰³ Thus, despite the tyranny of distance ruling out attending games *in situ*, dispersed members, who gather together

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁰⁰ Sam Blum, “What turns an American into a diehard Arsenal fan? EPL takes root in the US.”

¹⁰¹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1989, p. 302.

¹⁰² Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 61.

¹⁰³ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, p. 243.

and sing praises to the team, can still be there “in spirit,” beholding “through a glass darkly”¹⁰⁴ the spectacle on screen. For in the Cathedral of Gooners, communion is available to all; whoever calls upon the names of the Invincibles shall inspire the *Wenger Weltgeist* and be saved, for a moment, from sure existential damnation.¹⁰⁵

Nostalgia and the Evolution of a Footballing Identity

Although fans may see Arsenal as a panacea for existential distress, it remains to be said that the club itself is *liquid*. As a product of the world, the club is subject to the same conditions as the world; hence if the world is liquid, then so are the things that make it up. Ironically, while fans like Taylor find in Arsenal a solid, unchanging entity to cling to, the club’s history is characterised by major upheavals, the most recent of which took place in 2006, when Arsenal moved out of its eponymous stadium in Highbury, and into a new home ground in Ashburton Grove. Unsurprisingly, the move has not been universally popular with fans. A major bone of contention is the name the club granted the new ground: instead of acknowledging the club’s legacy or relationship with the local area, the stadium bears the name of a Middle Eastern airliner. After agreeing to a £100 million sponsorship agreement with Emirates Airlines in 2004,¹⁰⁶ Arsenal named its soon-to-be new home “Emirates Stadium.” Despite ambivalence within the boardroom

¹⁰⁴ cf. 1 Corinthians 13:12.

¹⁰⁵ N.B. This sentence ought not be taken too literally

¹⁰⁶ “Arsenal name new ground,” *BBC Sport*, accessed October 13, 2014, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/teams/a/arsenal/3715678.stm>.

about selling the naming rights of a beloved English institution, the club reasoned that the end result of greater financial security would justify the means taken to get there. For Arsenal's chairman Peter Hill-Wood, having the stadium named after an iconic figure in the club's history, such as Herbert Chapman or Arsene Wenger, would have been preferable; but "things have changed in football and this is a wonderful offer we have received - the biggest ever in English football. We must move on."¹⁰⁷

But the Arsenal board's desire to move with the times does not sit comfortably with all the club's fans, many of whom cherish their memories of Highbury, where the club was based for almost a century. Compared to Highbury, Emirates Stadium has, at least initially, flattered to deceive, existing mostly sans context or history. In Marc Augé's vocabulary, it is a *non-place*, having none of the qualities of the "anthropological place," where the "organically social" can be created and thrive.¹⁰⁸ As a non-place, "the Emirates" may be described as a "non-archaeological, nonhistorical, nonrelational space which is not concerned with identity."¹⁰⁹ Certainly for Arsenal fans, Emirates Stadium did not at first grant them the impression of being part of a community of long-standing supporters, because the elements that render a place "anthropological"—namely, the "complicities of language, local

¹⁰⁷ "Arsenal name new ground."

¹⁰⁸ Marc Augé, *Non-places*. London: Verso, 1995, p. 76.

¹⁰⁹ Tim Gregory, "The Rise of the Productive Non-Place: The Contemporary Office as a State of Exception. Space and Culture," *Space and Culture* 14, no. 3 (2011): 244, doi: 10.1177/1206331211412264.

references, [and] the unformulated rules of living know-how”¹¹⁰ – were simply not *in place*. As one aggrieved Arsenal supporter put it,

nowhere is the change in football culture that we *once loved* more apparent than at the Emirates. The ticket prices are extortionate, and the over repressive attitude of the stewards inside the ground is far too draconian. We feel like kids under the eye of [the] headmaster, and the release of energy that people *used to get* from football has been nullified so as not to upset any of the new breed of fan who have their money to sit down and be entertained.¹¹¹

The author of the remark, Matthew Bazzell, evinces considerable pessimism about the type of matchday experience Arsenal football supporters can expect to have there. He believes that there *used to be* an electric atmosphere at the home of Arsenal, but that it no longer exists. As the atmosphere had contributed to the supporter’s positive evaluation of his football club, his inability now to recognise it causes him grief. Of particular concern is “the new breed of fan,” whose perceived lack of loyalty is worthy of condemnation. Instead of showing unconditional support for the team, the plastic fans, he reasons, view the stadium the same way they would the theatre – namely, as a house of entertainment.

¹¹⁰ Marc Augé, *Non-places*, p. 81.

¹¹¹ “Fan Views: How times have changed,” *The Black Scarf Movement*, accessed October 13, 2014, <http://www.blackscarfafc.co.uk/fan-views-how-times-have-changed.html>.

It can be said that self-righteous supporters, having grown weary of their new home, are prone to wax lyrical about “the world of yesterday.”¹¹² When the contemporary world is not enough, they seek shelter in the memory of a bygone era, which in their minds will always be greater than the present age. Nostalgia is the dominant feeling of one irate Gooner, who recalls the greener pastures of Highbury:

Many a time the lads and I would take a trip down to The Arsenal on non-matchdays, just to hang around OUR club. We’d take a walk into the Marble Halls, the same walk our heroes made on matchday. You got the feeling we were all one - just they had the skill to walk that extra 20 yards onto the pitch. The Commissionaire at the doors to the Marble Halls would touch his hat in a salute. We had class.¹¹³

The reason the anonymous Gooner finds consolation in the remembrance of things past¹¹⁴ is because the past instills in him a sense of belonging. Wearing rose-coloured glasses, the fan remembers “the good old days” when the *categorical* ‘we’ “had class.” Walking around the old stadium at Highbury had affirmed his sense of affiliation to the club: all that marked out players from fans like him, he believes, was their superior skill on the ball. Although acknowledging the difference between the *categorical* ‘we’ of the fans and the *listed* ‘we’ of the players, the fan thinks the

¹¹² cf. Stefan Zweig’s *The World of Yesterday* (1942).

¹¹³ “Fan Views: How times have changed,” author’s own emphasis.

¹¹⁴ cf. Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913).

distinction is largely irrelevant: what counts is that “we” are all in it together.

But his saccharine walk down memory lane quickly turns to nausea, as the bleakness of the moment comes into view. As the article’s refrain “How times have changed”¹¹⁵ suggests, the changes that time has wrought are difficult to accept. In his tragic conservatism, the author dwells on the beauty of the past, ruing the fact that it “must die”¹¹⁶ so that the club could move into a larger capacity stadium. His and other fans’ disaffection with the club’s relocation to the Ashburton Grove is a manifestation of extreme tophilia, for the club, after all, did not move very far: Emirates Stadium is only a few streets away from where the old stadium in Highbury used to be. For Arsenal supporters to believe that the club’s relocation to Ashburton Grove signifies its losing touch with its roots, they have to “pass continually over traces left behind.”¹¹⁷

According to Maurice Halbwachs, “every group... immobilizes time in its own way and imposes on its members the illusion that, in a given duration of a constantly changing world, certain zones have acquired a relative stability and balance in which nothing essential is altered.”¹¹⁸ For Arsenal to enter, as it were, the pantheon of immortals, its members must decide what aspects of the club’s identity are essential, and thus must be preserved for

¹¹⁵ “Fan Views: How times have changed.”

¹¹⁶ cf. John Keats’ *Ode on Melancholy* (1819).

¹¹⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, From “The Collective Memory,” In *The Collective Memory Reader*, eds. Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky- Seroussi, and Daniel Levy.,New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 149.

¹¹⁸ Maurice Halbwachs, From “The Collective Memory,” p. 149.

evermore. Hence the reason that some supporters complain about the current state of affairs is because they regard Highbury as an essential article that has been lost forever. Yet for the move away from Highbury to be the cause of their displacement, these supporters must necessarily overlook the fact that Arsenal's provenance lies not in North London, but in the South-East London district of Woolwich. To that end, Ernest Renan's view of forgetting as a formative element in the making of a nation¹¹⁹ applies just as readily to football clubs. In the minds of supporters nostalgic for the Highbury days, the old stadium will forever be the spiritual home of the club, with the Old Manor Ground, where Arsenal had played before 1913,¹²⁰ having long faded into oblivion.

The Meaning of Arsenalisation

The club's migration from Highbury to the Emirates suggests that Arsenal is, as it were, a *free-floating entity*. By "free-floating," we mean that the club is not ultimately defined by its whereabouts, however much, as Shobe argues, they may be "drawn upon" to "construct ideas about place and nation."¹²¹ Although the club's move from Highbury to Holloway has proven a "traumatic" experience for some fans, as we have noted above, the move has not

¹¹⁹ Ernest Renan (2011). From "What is a Nation?" In *The Collective Memory Reader*, eds. Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy., New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 80.

¹²⁰ "Club moves from Woolwich to Highbury," *Arsenal*, accessed October 13, 2014, <http://www.arsenal.com/history/laying-the-foundations/club-moves-from-woolwich-to-highbury>.

¹²¹ Hunter Shobe, "Place, identity and football: Catalonia, Catalanisme and Football Club Barcelona, 1899-1975," *National Identities* 10, no. 3 (2008): 329, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 4, 2015).

resulted in the club losing its identity. In 2009 the club introduced the policy of *Arsenalisation*, which the former described as “turning the Gunners’ home into a very visible stronghold of all things Arsenal.”¹²² By introducing visual elements ostensibly characteristic of Arsenal into the new ground, the club aimed to dispel the sense of alienation that some fans claimed to feel there. As part of the *Arsenalisation* project, the club built structures just outside the gates of the stadium to serve as *lieux de mémoire* for Gooners, both current and future. Though designed to commemorate a secular institution, these sites, which include the “Spirit of Highbury” and Armoury Square, project what may be described as a quasi-religious aura. Although the Spirit of Highbury is a picture of every Arsenal player to have played at Highbury, it is also, as its nickname “Highbury Shrine” implies, a sanctuary commemorating players who all embodied Arsenal’s *weltgeist*, or its collective conscience. In a sense, then, the photo is an attempt at transferring Arsenal’s spirit to Holloway from a ground that, ironically, was never its birthplace in the first place.

Equally imbued with quasi-religious significance are the bronze statues Arsenal has erected outside the Emirates. Commemorating Thierry Henry, Tony Adams, Dennis Bergkamp, Herbert Chapman, and Ken Friar, the five statues elevate figures who have played a vital role in the club’s history to a status befitting

¹²² “Club begins ‘Arsenalisation’ of the Emirates,” *Arsenal*, accessed October 6, 2014, <http://www.arsenal.com/news/news-archive/club-begins-arsenalisation-of-the-emirates>.

saints. Footballistically speaking,¹²³ they did possess a celestial touch: Thierry Henry is widely considered the club's best ever player, having scored a record 226 goals in an Arsenal jersey; Tony Adams spent nineteen years at Arsenal, making 669 appearances for the club and winning the league as team captain; Dennis Bergkamp scored 120 goals over the course of 11 years with the club; while Herbert Chapman and Ken Friar contributed to the club from an administrative capacity, with the former managing the club between 1925 and 1934, winning the league four times in five years, and the latter working as a “loyal servant” at the club for 60 years.¹²⁴ In a symbolic sense, therefore, the unveiling of the statues signifies a kind of *canonisation*: to the Arsenal faithful, these five figures have become, as it were, the Patron Saints of Footballing Miracles.

Alongside these newly-minted relics is Armoury Square, a plaza composed of stones upon which Gooners may pay to have their personal messages engraved.¹²⁵ With more than 10,500 stones having now been installed,¹²⁶ Armoury Square bears a certain resemblance to a cemetery. Like cemeteries, the square exists to commemorate the lives of individuals – the main difference being that the occupants of the latter may still be living. The fact that

¹²³ The adverb “footballistically” was coined by Arsenal manager Arsène Wenger.

¹²⁴ “Arsenal Statues,” *Arsenal*, accessed October 9, 2014, <http://www.arsenal.com/arsenal-history/arsenal-s-heritage/arsenal-statues>.

¹²⁵ “Armoury Square - Fans and Legends Together, Forever Arsenal,” *Arsenal*, accessed October 6, 2014,

<https://bookings.arsenal.com/stones/armourysquare/stones/book.htm>.

¹²⁶ “Armoury Square - Fans and Legends Together, Forever Arsenal.”

Gooners would spend up to £595.00 for a personalised stone¹²⁷ is a strong illustration of the power of the Arsenal identity: the reason that thousands of people spend hundreds of pounds on a stone is so that they may make their affiliation with the club known for all eternity. Hence we may say that the stones serve a similar function to that of the Philosopher's stone. Like the famed *lapis philosophorum* that alchemists sought after in earlier times, the stones of Armoury Square imbue their possessor with eternal life – albeit one that exists only in the mind. Of course, being mortals, the proud owners of the stones in the Arsenal “graveyard” will eventually die; but as Soren Kierkegaard acknowledged, true believers believe that even if they die, they shall live¹²⁸: “For in human terms death is the last thing of all, and in human terms hope exists only so long as there is life; but to [the believer’s] eyes death is by no mean the last thing of all, just another minor event in that which is all, an eternal life.”¹²⁹

Since the Arsenalisation project serves to preserve the Arsenal identity, it could be claimed that collective identity itself is transferable. If a piece of land in Holloway can be transformed into the new home of Arsenal, it means that Arsenal's identity is not necessarily bound to any physical locales. Although, as we have seen, many fans will forever regard Highbury as the spiritual home of Arsenal, the commercial success of Armoury Square suggests

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ cf. John 11:25.

¹²⁹ Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*. London: Penguin Books, 1989, p. 4.

that Gooners are willing to accept Emirates Stadium as the new home. It is perhaps not surprising that the club has taken full commercial advantage of its “free-floating” identity. When Arsenal launched its collaboration with German sportswear company Puma in 2014, the companies launched a marketing campaign brimming with religious symbolism. Using a screen situated on the River Thames, the club projected images of prominent Arsenal figures, including one of Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger appearing to walk on the surface of the river, and one of French striker Olivier Giroud kicking a football into the London Eye, which had been made to resemble the club’s Highbury clock.¹³⁰ Indeed, the religious symbolism of the former image is far from coincidental: by supposedly mimicking the miracle of Jesus Christ walking on the Sea of Galilee, Wenger is portrayed as a quasi-Messiah, a “chosen one” who has descended from Heaven and is burdened with ushering the club into an age of glory.

But tellingly, for all the campaign’s seeming tribute to Saussurean semiotics, it is important to note that the event was not held in Woolwich or Highbury, where most of Arsenal’s history has taken place, but rather in the heart of London. The creative director of the campaign, Mark Bonner, explained that

¹³⁰ Rachael Steven, “Puma launches Arsenal kit with water projection film on the Thames,” *Creative Review*, accessed October 13, 2014, <http://www.creativereview.co.uk/cr-blog/2014/july/puma-arsenal-kit>.

Arsenal was established south of the river in Woolwich and then moved north, but we wanted to establish the launch firmly in London's centre. It's a bold, aggressive thing to do but it also has a resonance – the clock face looks out to the north from the Southbank, and represents the famous clock that Arsenal transported from its original home to what is now the Emirates Stadium. As it was being broadcast to important Asian and North American markets, the location also provided a really iconic view of London for fans in those regions.¹³¹

The reason the marketing team chose the River Thames as the campaign launch site is because of its international recognisability. As the video was to be streamed live around the world,¹³² it made sense to have a setting that the “important Asia and North American markets” might be able to identify. Therefore, while the video emphasises Arsenal's London credentials, it downplays the club's South-East London provenance. And for a simple reason: the video was not made for Londoners, but for an international audience who may not know South-East London, but would probably recognise Central London. The fact that the marketers use the space of flows to portray Arsenal as the quintessential London team, ignoring the inconvenient fact that the city plays home to several Premier League and lower division teams, entails the club's turning its gaze away from its origins. As Mathews suggests, “One's home is [...] not one's particular ancestral place, but rather no more than a node from

¹³¹ Rachael Steven, “Puma launches Arsenal kit with water projection film on the Thames.”

¹³² Ibid.

which to access the globe.”¹³³ In the need to reach the overseas markets, the club brushes over aspects of its identity that they would be less liable to understand. Hence while Arsenal embarks on the Arsenalisation project in order to perpetuate its legacy in a new locale, where recently constructed *lieux de mémoire* help to create an aura of permanence, at the same time the club abandons all hope of being bound by a particular locale, and seeks instead to open itself to the interminable spaces where its identity may well be felt and appreciated. While Britain’s imperial heyday is long gone, the sun may possibly never set on the Arsenal Empire, the minds of whose subjects are well and truly colonised.

Conclusion

As far as titles go, *The Arsenalisation of Space* is one rich in significance.¹³⁴ As a result of time-space distanciation, the meaning of place has changed. Although place remains a physical area in which human activity takes place, one no longer needs to occupy a given place in order to impact on it. Through the space of flows, the estimated 100 million Gooners living today can reaffirm their shared space of individuation from afar, potentially transmitting

¹³³ Gordon Mathews, *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket*, p. 196.

¹³⁴ The title of my paper “The Arsenalisation of Space” was inspired by a 2007 French paper called *L’arsenalisation de l’espace : projets américains, réactions européennes* by Laurence Nardon. It is worth mentioning, however, that this latter article discusses the militarisation of outer space and has nothing whatsoever to do with the globalisation of an English football club. Of course, in my article the word “space” does not refer to the physical atmosphere beyond the earth’s atmosphere; on the contrary, “space” here refers to the Arsenal space of individuation that Gooners occupy, and to the space of flows that enable them to occupy it.

Arsenal football matches to places far removed from the stadium. Television and the internet enable fans to foster an emotional relationship with a football club nominally based in London, making it easier for anyone to buy into the club and join its imagined community. However intricate and seemingly random the patchwork of fans may be, fans come to communicate their collective conscience, expressing an almost patriotic sentiment for the club as one would for a nation. While Neil Conner argues that the term ‘imagined communities’ ought not be applied to “deterritorialized groupings” like football clubs because it “is both limited by its geographic scale and its intended purpose,”¹³⁵ we beg to differ. Because imagined communities are abstractions formed in the imagination, their borders are inherently ambiguous. The porosity of New Zealand’s borders, at least in the minds of Kiwi expatriates, undermines the view that such “deterritorialized groupings” as famous football clubs are not fit to be called “imagined communities”; for despite fans living everywhere, they all share the same collective conscience that no tyranny of distance could ever smother. The fact that some researchers are willing to apply Anderson’s term to Twitter,¹³⁶ despite the social networking service engendering an even less tangible sense of kinship than football clubs, reaffirms my belief that the power of imagined

¹³⁵ Neil Conner, “Global cultural flows and the routes of identity: the imagined worlds of Celtic FC,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 15, no. 5 (2014): 525-546, doi:10.1080/14649365.2014.908233.

¹³⁶ Anatoliy Gruzd, Barry Wellman and Yuri Takhteyev, “Imagining Twitter as an Imagined Community,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 55, no. 10 (2011): 1294-1318. doi: 10.1177/0002764211409378.

communities lies in their being products of the collective imagination. This idea of a single individual imagining being on the same page, as it were, as millions of likeminded others has been examined by such authors as Conner, Shobe, and Sondaal; this article builds on their findings by linking the concept of imagined community to the most deracinated club in Britain, whose newest home is undergoing Arsenalisation so as to inherit, as it were, the “soul” of its illustrious predecessors. Were it not for the shared imagination, the community would not coalesce around a shared set of symbols installed in a patch of Holloway that, until 2006, had no previous ties to the club. Therefore Arsenal’s ability to *Arsenalise* a non-place, whereby it becomes transformed into the club’s new spiritual home, paradoxically shows how a liquid identity such as Arsenal’s may provide one with a sense of stability. In liquid times such as these, by subscribing to a club that is immediately accessible everywhere, despite being *embedded* in the British capital; by being in concert, as it were, with a symphony of heterogeneous individuals who all share a passion for Arsenal, one may gain a sense of ontological security capable of allaying one’s fears of being lost in a hostile wilderness. Of all places, it is in a liquefied football club that one may find a release from existential concerns, if to a limited degree and for a limited period of time. For as Carl Maria von Weber once said, “The individual is an ass, and yet the whole is the voice of God.”¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Carl Maria von Weber, quoted in Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1950, p. 35.

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William Sidnam is a recent graduate of European Studies from the University of Auckland. Before obtaining First Class Honours in that honours degree, he spent his undergraduate years pursuing a BA/BCom conjoint degree with majors in Italian, International Business and Marketing. In 2012, William attended an Italian language school in Modena, before studying English and Philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris. His research is focused on sport and cultural globalisation, but he is also interested in philosophy, translation studies, and advertising. Outside the Ivory Tower, William enjoys playing futsal and tennis. In addition to having once won a short film competition, he has helped translate academic pieces from French and Italian, and has edited the subtitles of two Italian films. He used to tutor English and distribute pamphlets at Eden Park, but is currently working as a copywriter for a home shopping channel.