FINDING HOME in Football

By Josh Bland

PhD researcher of Sports and Industrial Heritage at the
Cambridge Heritage Research Centre, University of Cambridge.

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I'd like to dedicate this piece of work to my uncle and great friend Andrew Davey, a true Londoner and one of the great football men I know.

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Josh Bland

RESEARCHER PROFILE

I am a PhD researcher of sports and industrial heritage at the CHRC (Cambridge Heritage Research Centre). My ESRC-funded PhD research aims to understand "football clubs as remnants of industrial heritage". More specifically, I'm seeking to explore how football clubs may empower working-class communities to preserve traditional working-class values, stabilise civic, urban identity, rationalise the (in)tangible losses of deindustrialisation and provide a voice for marginalised communities. I also have significant experience working within football as a journalist and a policy advisor – writing freelance for a number of national outlets, as well as working as Director of Policy for Fair Game UK.

My research has significant theoretical and thematic overlap with the Curating London programme and the thematic collecting on Sport in particular. My research is largely concerned with the social and community value of football clubs in contemporary society. Resultantly, I attempt to place the lived experience of diverse communities at the heart of my research through an open, co-creative ethnographic methodology, whilst touching on the themes of placemaking, identity and community building.

FOREWORD

“London calling, yes, I was there, too
And you know what they said? Well, some of it was true
London calling at the top of the dial
And after all this, won’t you give me a smile?”

(The Clash, 1979)

When London Calling hit the charts in 1979, and the sound of The Clash fuelled the streets of London and beyond, many people associated the song with what London stood for as a city. However, a few would imagine that ‘London Calling’ would become a musical red carpet that still accompanies the entrance of football teams such as Fulham FC.

Football and London share much closer links than this song. London is home to people from all over the world for whom football plays an important part in constructing a sense of individual and community identity. And it is this relationship between football, home and the city that this report powerfully addresses.

This research is the outcome of a collaboration between London Museum and the Cambridge Heritage Research Centre, University of Cambridge. Josh Bland’s report brings in conversation ideas from Heritage Studies such as the relationship between heritage and identity, with contemporary curatorial debates about people’s lived experience. Between 2018 and 2023, the Curating London programme at London Museum has harnessed knowledge gleaned from the lived experience of Londoners to produce research and create collections that represent aspects of everyday life which have been traditionally overlooked by museums. During 2022-23, Curating London focused on the theme of Sport with the aim to celebrate Londoners’ engagement and participation in sporting activities.

Arguably, football provides local communities with recognition and a sense of home. Football, as a place maker, conveys values and revives the tangible and intangible aspects of the past and present of London communities. Shedding light onto the different associations communities have developed with football and its environs, from migrants to fans and athletes, Finding Home in Football marks a significant shift in the understanding of the role of football in urban environments. This report ultimately provides a platform to think about how Londoners might negotiate their lived experiences through football, how football might define our relationship with others and what museums can learn from these complex dynamics.

Dr Andreas Pantazatos
Associate Professor in Heritage Studies, Director MPhil in Heritage Studies, Partner CHRC, Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge.

Dr Domenico Sergi
Senior Curator (Curating London), London Museum.

INTRODUCTION

This project explores how London's varied football spaces may empower communities to forge a sense of "home" in the city. It investigates the specific ways in which this sense of "home" may manifest across different football spaces and communities in London. In doing so this project also attempts to articulate the multi-faceted nature and malleability of home and football spaces as operational concepts. In an attempt to capture the breadth of London's football communities, this project focuses on a "hat-trick" of case studies each pertaining to the three central ways in which Londoners may engage with football – as players, as spectators and as stakeholders. These are analysed in relation to Plough Lane (the historic home of AFC Wimbledon), a small set of pubs and social clubs connected to diasporic communities which hosted screenings of matches during the 2022 World Cup, and Hackney Women's FC – Europe's first 'out' football team.

In 2012, Phillips undertook the first critical analysis of the representation of sport within UK museums. His conclusion was simple – sport is increasingly visible in the UK museum landscape, especially through the establishment of specialist museums such as the National Football Museum in Manchester. At the same time, more generalist museums in particular, are yet to tap into the potential of football, and sports more generally, as a deeply embedded cultural phenomenon shaping the lives of individuals and communities across the country. London Museum's Curating London programme (2018-2023) and the Sport thematic collecting programme in particular (2022-2023), represented an opportunity to use museum-based research as a means to start redressing this balance.

The Curating London programme placed people's lived experiences at the heart of curatorial research and practice, working with Londoners to collect digital and physical objects pertaining to contemporary history and everyday life in London (Dhaliwal-Davies and Sergi 2022; Sergi and Sparkes, 2023). In line with this overarching aim, this report attempts to research, and document the lived experiences of three particular football communities, illustrating how London's football spaces can play a role in constructing individual identities, forging communities, promoting inclusivity, and fostering activism in local areas.

The hope is that this report will not only illuminate the vitality and centrality of football as a cultural phenomenon in London, but also the increasingly deterritorialised ways in which communities are searching for, finding and – crucially – creating homes in London.

FOOTBALL IN LONDON: HISTORIC CONTEXT

In the pantheon of global footballing cities, London is a true behemoth[1]. London's footballing landscape is truly unique in its cultural variety, depth, and richness. Only Buenos Aires can boast more than London's 12 professional clubs, and no city can match London's 22 stadia which hold more than 10,000 spectators (Tongue, 2016; Inglis, 2014; Waldon, 2021). Football has been played in London for centuries. In its early, medieval incarnations, football was a highly informal, physical game played in the streets, more akin to modern day rugby than football. Such was the sport's perceived violence, that in the sixteenth century, Elizabeth I moved to supress its growing popularity, decreeing that: "no foteball play [was to be] suffered within the City of London" (Glinert, 2009; Hidden London, 2016).

It was in the nineteenth century, however, as modern football started to take shape, that London became a central node in the development of the game. By the early 19th century numerous amateur clubs were in existence in London, and in 1863 the Football Association (FA) was founded in the city, codifying the rules of the sport, and establishing the governing body which administers English football to this day (Hidden London, 2016; Glinert, 2009). Though London clubs initially lagged behind the industrial North and the Midlands (no London team even joined the Football League until 1893 – 5 years after its foundation), London clubs started to make a strong mark on the game in the inter war period, populating the top two divisions and winning major honours.

1 For the purposes of this report, London is defined as the 32 London boroughs (plus the City of London) which form the Greater London Authority.

TIMELINE OF LONDON FOOTBALL

1863
Rules of football are codified, and the FA is founded at the Freemasons' Tavern, Covent Garden

1872
First FA Cup Final is held at the Kennington Oval

1879
London's oldest professional club – Fulham – is founded

1888
The Football League is founded after a meeting in London

1891
Arsenal become London's first team to turn professional

1924
England's first game at Wembley

Figure 1. A brief timeline of key moments in London's footballing history (Author's own).

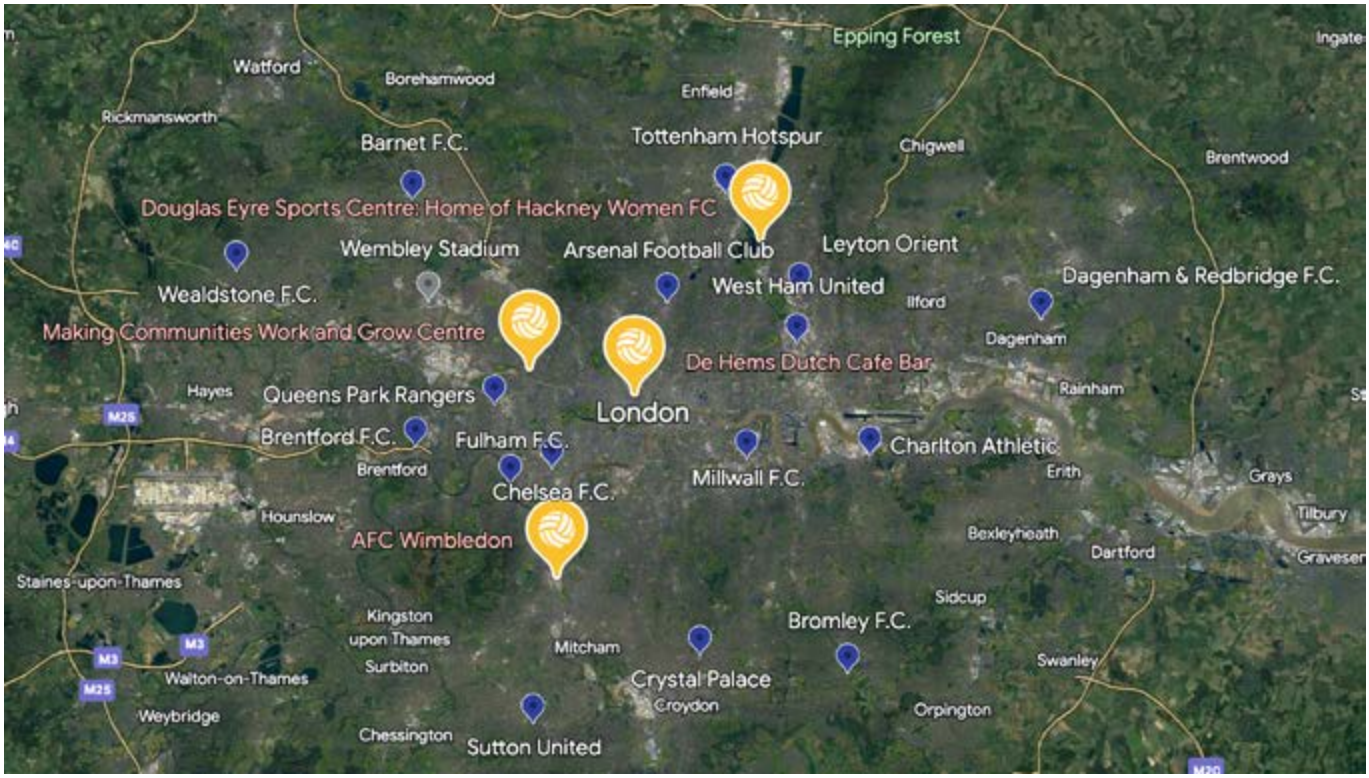

Figure 2. Map showing the location of my four case studies in London (yellow icons, highlighted in red text); as well as London's professional football clubs (playing in the top 5 tiers of English football) and Wembley Stadium (Author's Own).

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the history of football in London can be charted through three distinct phases, each in turn influenced by wider political and cultural developments. First, there was the post-war consensus boom, marked by sky-rocketing attendance to football matches, the unprecedented success of London clubs and most notably, England's historic World Cup win at Wembley in 1966 (Tongue, 2016). Then, through the 70s and 80s came football's darkest hour defined by hooliganism (with notable London-based hooligan gangs at Millwall, Chelsea and West Ham), racism on the terraces, appalling stadium conditions, plummeting attendances and the demonisation of football fans in politics and the media (Goldblatt, 2015; Thomas, 2018). From the early 1990s, football has increasingly become a business. This culminated in the establishment of the Premier League in 1991, ushering in an era of glamorous all-seater stadia and pay-per-view TV, during which London clubs at the top level seem to have flourished under global ownership (Goldblatt, 2015; Tongue, 2016; Tobar and Ramshaw, 2022).

1961
Tottenham Hotspur becomes the first English team to win league and cup double

1966
England win World Cup at Wembley

1992
Premier League is established, featuring 6 London teams

1996
England (including London) host European Championships

2007
First match at the new Wembley Stadium

2012
Chelsea become first Londonteam to win the European Cup

Though today London is home to some of the most globally recognisable and iconic football clubs and stadia in the world, it is beneath this glitzy surface that the true richness of London's football scene can be teased out. Elite, professional football is not the sum of London's football scene. Rather, football in London is a highly fragmented, heterogenous eco-system, which serves the social and cultural needs of the city's increasingly multi-faceted population.

Beyond the game's top table, London has a thriving league and non-league presence, populated by smaller professional and semi-pro clubs. These institutions serve and are deeply imbricated with smaller districts, boroughs, and highly localised neighbourhoods, often drawing over 90% of their crowds from the immediate radius of the stadium (Goldblatt, 2015). This mass local engagement means that these smaller football clubs are often the chief force driving the formation of local, neighbourhood identity and community spirit. They are also often the main provider of leisure space, charitable and community support within a local area (Tongue, 2016; Leach, 2020; Watkins and Cox, 2021). This means that the club itself can become both symbolic of and hugely important within specific urban environments (Gray, 2014; Leach, 2020).

Perhaps even more importantly, London boasts the most vibrant, diverse amateur and grassroots football scene in the country. According to a recent FA report, approximately 2.15million people in London play various forms of the game regularly - from 11-a-side Sunday League to 5-a-side walking football. This represents 16% of the nation's players and places the economic worth of football in London at around £1.6billion in terms of healthcare savings and social value (FA, 2021). Crucially, it is in London's parks, fields, and playgrounds – spaces which have become the fulcrum of the city's vast amateur football scene – that the true scale, variety, and ubiquity of Londoners' engagement with football becomes apparent. Take for example Hackney Marshes, a sprawling green in East London which plays host to 88 football pitches and is widely considered the spiritual home of grassroots football. Formed in 1946, it is famed for its rich sporting history, and as a hotbed of professional players, like former England captains Bobby Moore, John Terry, and David Beckham who all trained in the Marshes in their youth. However, what makes the Marshes a fantastic window into the diversity and cultural importance of London's football scene is the number of vibrant amateur footballing clubs, which reflect London's changing demographics and social dynamics. Indeed, the Marshes has long been fêted as a site where migrants, refugees and minoritised groups can foster friendships and affirm their own identities (Connelly, 1999). The social dynamism of Hackney Marshes is perfectly captured in an interview with an 84-year-old veteran of the Marshes:

"The immigrants [in the 50s and 60s] were the Italians and the Irish then. Gradually over time they disappeared into the community, they became native...[Today we have] three Ukrainian teams, Bulgarians, Ghanaians, and a team from Brazil called the Brazilian Boys — they're pretty good!"

(Life Beyond Sport, 2022).

From globally recognised clubs to Sunday league pub teams, London's football scene is hugely varied, and the city's communities interact with the sport in myriad ways. But how has this manifested in museum collections and wider scholarly work to date?

The last twenty years have seen a healthy development around academic examinations of contemporary football culture – with strong literature around football developing in sports science, history, human geography, sociology, and psychology. This has encompassed the development of some football specialist journals, such as *Soccer and Society*, with academics especially interested in analysing football as a complex cultural phenomenon through the lenses of identity, community, place, and globalisation. Despite this uptick in interest, academic work on London football is scarce and piecemeal in nature, focusing on individual case studies rather than drawing up a comparative picture of football across the city. Perhaps the most recognised study on football in London came in the form of a wider volume written in 2014 by Simon Inglis, entitled *Played in London: Charting the heritage of a city at play*. Inglis' work charts the history of football – and sports more generally in London – building up a significant inventory of key clubs, stadia, parks, pub, and leisure centres which

Figure 3. Hackney Marshes, London Borough of Hackney – "Hackney Marshes and Olympic remnants" by sludgegulper is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/?

have played a role in London's broad sporting past (Inglis, 2014). Though Inglis' work represents an incredibly useful reference text, he remains largely a prisoner of his own brief. *Played in London* was produced through an English Heritage project – concerned with profiling and protecting London's sporting infrastructure and "sportscapes". Resultantly, Inglis' pre-occupation is the physical structures of football, rather than the communities and cultures which have developed around the sport. As a result of this more traditional, management-focused, monumentalist view of sports heritage, his work provides minimal critical reflection and analysis of the meaning of football in London itself. It is in this context that I believe an intervention is well overdue.

This state of affairs is mirrored by museum collections (or lack thereof) around football. As outlined by Moore and Hughson, sport has historically been seen as "other" to culture. This means that sports collections have been limited to specialist museums, often run by sports clubs and institutions themselves (Moore and Hughson, 2022). However, over the past 20 years, football has gained unprecedented visibility in the museum sector – enjoying the status of an elevated cultural phenomenon (Goldblatt, 2015). London's seven sports specialist museums[2] continue to attract large visitor numbers, and in the last 12 months alone there have been two notable football exhibitions – the Design Museum's *Design of Football*, as well as the London Museum's special exhibit on England captain Harry Kane, *Harry Kane: I want to play football*. Though these exhibitions represent welcome steps towards presenting football to popular audiences – indeed the very presence of football-themed displays can be seen as a form of cultural legitimation – they have focused on football as a siloed cultural phenomenon, with not enough critical engagement on the importance of football to everyday lived experiences. The two exhibitions largely present football as isolated from history and culture more generally, taking respectively the history of design (of football kits, equipment, and stadia) and the personal history of an iconic footballer as their chief subject matters.

This research represents a welcome contribution to change the current state of affairs, arguing for the place of football in contemporary heritage discussions and museum collections. The hope is that this report, with its methodological focus on the lived experience of specific communities in London today, can encourage museums to look at football as a cultural phenomenon which needs to be appropriately reflected in their collections.

2 These museums are: Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Museum, Arsenal F.C. Museum, Chelsea F.C. Museum, World Rugby Museum, Marylebone Cricket Club Museum at Lord's, Brooklands Museum of British Motorsport and Aviation, River and Rowing Museum (Note that this list does not include private collections or smaller specialist heritage displays present at many stadia or sport sites around London (e.g. the mini-heritage display in the club shop at AFC Wimbledon's Plough Lane Stadium)).

KEY DEFINITIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

As outlined in the introduction, the chief aim of this report is to explore how communities use London's varied football spaces to forge a sense of home in the city. Before diving into the analysis of the three chosen case studies, it is vital to lay out some working definitions of the key concepts used and offer some reflections on the way in which the data was collected and analysed.

First, what are "football spaces"? Space is a social product, a relation between at least two objects, rather than a substance within itself. For a space to exist, two objects must exist – with the space being the distance or bridge between them (Urry, 1985). They can be both tangible – buildings, land masses, geographical regions – or intangible – social spaces. This means spaces can be both quantifiable, cartographic objects, which can be mapped, as well as intellectual, symbolic entities. Spaces are not merely a backdrop for social life, but a medium through which social relations are (re)produced (Gregory and Urry, 1985). This means that spaces are simultaneously the product and drive of human actions and agency (Lefebvre, 1991; Giddens, 1984). Spaces are human creations, which in turn shape human action. As outlined by Frank and Steets, football is a "space-constituting sociocultural practice" (Frank and Steets, 2010). In other words, football is a human activity through which humans constitute, create, or adapt spaces. These could include pitches, stadia, pubs, parks, and even social networks. I would therefore define football spaces as either cartographic or imaginary area created by communities with the purpose of being used for football related activities, be that playing, spectating or stakeholding.

The notion of 'home' is also deeply significant to this research. Home is an inherently slippery, multidimensional concept, which can encompass places, spaces, feelings, practices, and states of being (Mallett, 2004). It is also a concept which lays at the very heart at the very heart of football culture, through home stadia and football clubs' tendency to represent a specific "home" locale (Charleston, 2009). Resultantly, within the context of football – the notion of home strongly evokes ideas of locality, community, belonging and topophilia (strong sense of a place; Tuan, 1990).

Traditionally, home studies have privileged physical structures such as houses or dwellings as the subject of their analysis, thus limiting much scholarship on football and home to studies of football stadia (Mallett, 2004). As outlined by Mallett, researchers often approach studies of home with pre-conceived notions of what home may mean, inevitably shaped by their own experiences (Mallett, 2004). In Western scholarship especially, this has led home to be proffered as inherently desirable, due to its connotations of comfort, familiarity, and stability, as well as its strong links to family, identity, and community formation (Lockford, 2016). However, positive experiences of home are not universal; for some home may be fraught with social tension, danger, trauma, or even absent entirely (Short, 1999; Allen Fox, 2016).

However, academic discourses around home have increasingly coalesced around the notion that home itself cannot simply be conflated with the "house" or "dwelling". Rather, whilst home may be located in space, that space is not necessarily fixed. Indeed, home is a matter of feeling and relationality, and is drawn as much from intangible social networks and memory as much as physical places (Douglas, 1991). Though the notion of home is a value-laden concept, often tied to feelings of stability, security and fixity, home is never fixed or bounded. Instead, it is always constructed by those who profess attachment to a specific place (Massey, 1994). In this sense, home can be seen to as a verb, rather than a noun. Being at home is a state of being not necessarily bounded by a physical location, and too great of a focus on physical structures may obfuscate the crucial role played by social interactions in homemaking (Allen Fox, 2016). It is in this process of construction of home, that I believe football spaces can play a fundamental role.

In line with the Curating London programme, the bottom-up emphasis on lived experiences was the chief guiding force which shaped the aims of this research, as well as the specific methods chosen to investigate the case studies. For example, during the World Cup, I recorded soundscapes and videos of national supporters following their team in pubs, clubs, and social centres; for Hackney Women, I documented the club's queer history and the history of the club as a community hub through interviews with players; finally, for AFC Wimbledon and Plough Lane, I recorded oral histories and collected material culture charting the story of the stadium and club. Alongside this primary research layer, I also gathered supplementary data across all of the case studies: at AFC Wimbledon, I undertook observation sessions, recording soundscapes and photographing around the stadium site; at Hackney Women, I supplemented my collection with the recording of 4 short testimony interviews, in an attempt to better understand the club history and present day significance, I drew inspiration from Weed's ethnography of spectators in pubs during the 2002 World Cup, and more widely from Kusenbach's "hanging out as ethnography" method, and I used participant observation as a main method of inquiry noting my reflections into an ethnographic diary (Kusenbach, 2003; Weed, 2006).

Before diving into the case studies, I wish to address my own positionality with regards to the subject matter explored. I am a cisgender straight white man from the Midlands, with a strong professional and personal link to and interest in football. I am a huge football fan. I have supported my team – West Bromwich Albion – since the age of 7 and I have been working within the game (in both media and policy) for over a decade, before my academic research into football as heritage began three years ago. I believe this history gives me a unique advantage for working on this research. Though I am an outsider to each of the footballing communities I worked with during the course of the project, my own professional and personal history has imbued me with a unique knowledge, and admittedly, a particular perspective on football cultures.

Though this report is written against a wider footballing context which feels more open, accepting, and diverse than ever before, it is true that the sport itself remains structurally biased towards cisgender men. Traditionally, it has been men who are the players, the supporters and in control of the game's institutions, with masculine imagery and language shaping the way the game is perceived and forming the basis for the culture connected to the game (Bottomley, 2022; McAssey, 2022). The experiences of prejudice that many disadvantaged communities feel when engaging with football, alongside football's infamous history with hooliganism, and contemporary legacies of racism, and homophobia means that to many the game still feels like a hostile, alienating cultural space. It is important to acknowledge this in the context of a report which draws broadly positive conclusions about the social role of football in London.

PLOUGH LANE: THE STADIUM AS HOME

"Plough Lane is the...end of a long, hard journey...it's like you've been on a massive walk, massive journey...There's been more hurdles and barriers and hoops and loops and things thrown at you from all directions for generations. And you can go in there, and you can sit, in my seat, and look out over this palatial environment – and I mean, it's Plough Lane still – but like. It's just unbelievably amazing, because that is what we've done, that's what we've achieved"

Niall Couper, 10/02/23.

The most obvious way in which "home" is inscribed into football culture is through the idea of the home stadium. A football club's home stadium is either owned by or leased to a specific football club. It is usually located within or in close proximity to the geographic area nominally represented by the club. Often, clubs may have played in the same stadium or on the same site over the course of several decades with the stadium site becoming the backdrop for a multiplicity of experiences and memories for supporters (Thomas, 2018). Therefore, players and supporters of a specific team may develop strong, positive affective ties to their home stadium, conceptualising the stadium space as the symbolic home of the club, as well as the community of supporters attached to it (Charleston, 2009; Moore, 2017). Of all the material aspects of football culture, none have been studied in more depth than football stadia, originating with Bale's cultural geographic work on stadia, place identity and topophilia (Bale, 2000; Tuan, 1990). Since then, academic investigations have ranged from studies in the field of geography or anthropology focusing on the role of stadia in forging place-identity, to phenomenological studies focussed on people's experience of the space (Thomas, 2018).

Despite this established literature on the meaning and importance of football stadia to communities of supporters, there has been little investigation of the ways in which stadia may provide communities a symbolic home. Previous academic engagement regarding the intersection between football stadia and "home" has been largely limited to sports scientific or performance-based research examining the idea of "home advantage". The only substantive social science study on football stadia as "homes" was undertaken in 2009 by environmental geographer Stephanie Charleston. In her study, Charleston used an online survey to determine whether secondary spaces beyond the domestic sphere – in this case football stadia – could come to embody a sense of home, with the data throwing up some interesting results. Overall, 44.1% respondents agreed with the statement "my club's home ground means as much to me as my own home, with 62% respondents agreeing to the notion that "I feel more comfortable at [my club's] home ground than anywhere else" highlighting strong feelings of place attachment and belonging engendered by the home stadium amongst football supporters. Charleston ultimately concludes that rather than the stadium representing a home space in and of itself, supporters' symbolic links to the team, community and their neighbourhood is what underpins the notion that the stadium itself feels like a home (Thomas, 2018; Charleston, 2009). Though this work signals how a material football space may act as a home, I would suggest that Charleston's argument is entirely contingent on the relation stadia have with their locality, community, and the team itself. To illustrate this point I will draw on the Plough Lane case study – and specifically on an oral history interview and site visits with lifelong Wimbledon supporter Niall Couper.

Figure 4. Match day at the new Plough Lane Stadium, AFC Wimbledon vs Stevenage F.C. Lettering on the RY Stand reads "The Dons", a reference to the club's embattled history – 28/02/23. (Author's Own).

PLOUGH LANE AND AFC WIMBLEDON: THE CONTEXT

Plough Lane is the home stadium of AFC Wimbledon – a professional football club based in Merton, South London. Founded in 1889, Wimbledon first moved to the Plough Lane site in 1912. Before their election to the Football League in 1977, Wimbledon were one of the most successful amateur football clubs in English football history (Dunn, 2020). However, the club is most famous for its more recent history, during which time it has provided English football with two of its most iconic stories. First, the club won the FA Cup in 1988, as Wimbledon's so called "crazy gang" beat Liverpool 1-0 in the final at Wembley, in one of the greatest upsets in English football history. This victory represented the culmination of a remarkable rise from the team's non-league obscurity in just over a decade (Tongue, 2016; Waldon, 2021). The second – and the principal focus of this analysis – is the club's traumatic relocation at the beginning of the 90s. In 1992 – without consulting supporters – Wimbledon's owners unexpectedly moved the club away from their historic Plough Lane stadium. The club was forced to play their home games away from Merton, at Selhurst Park, home ground of Crystal Palace. Even worse was to follow. After numerous attempts by the owners to move the club away from London, on 28th May 2002 an FA independent commission made the unprecedented decision to green light plans to move the club to Milton Keynes and its eventual re-branding as "MK Dons". Both the initial move out of Plough Lane and the eventual Milton Keynes franchising sparked mass protests from supporters, who believed "they'd been betrayed and callously evicted...erased from the community, moved 70 miles away and told to accept our fate" (Dunn, 2020).

However, rather than following the club to Milton Keynes, fans forged an alternative path. Just two days after the decision to franchise the club to Milton Keynes was announced, a historic supporters meeting was called at a Wimbledon community centre, during which supporters relaunched what they saw as the original club under a new name – AFC Wimbledon. The new club would be owned and governed by an elected body of Wimbledon supporters in the form of a Supporters' Trust – the Dons' Trust. Crucially, this new club claimed continuity with the original Wimbledon FC, claiming the history of the original club as their own (Glinert, 2009). This decision has since been ratified by the FA, with the club's historic trophies, honours and memorabilia eventually returned by MK Dons to the London Borough of Merton (Copa90, 2021; MK Dons Supporters Association, 2006). Since 2002, AFC Wimbledon have spectacularly climbed back upwards, gaining promotion to the Football League in 2011 and now finding themselves playing in League Two, the fourth tier of English Football (Dunn, 2020).

Despite on-field success, one problem remained: the club was still 'exiled' from its historic Plough Lane home stadium. From its re-foundation, AFC Wimbledon were forced to play at Kingsmeadow in Kingston-upon-Thames. As outlined by Wimbledon supporter and former Dons' Trust board member Niall Couper

"...the dream of Plough Lane was always there."

But how could the club get back to Plough Lane? The original stadium had long since been demolished, after developers snapped up the land to build flats. Even worse, the construction of a new stadium would likely cost tens of millions of pounds. To solve the problem, the club's supporters set their sight on the recently closed Wimbledon Stadium – a near derelict dog-racing stadium located just half a mile from the original Plough Lane site (Dunn, 2022). The construction of the £32million stadium on the Wimbledon Stadium site was primarily enabled by two crowdfunding campaigns driven by the supporters themselves, with fans ultimately investing £5.5million into a "Plough Lane Bond", the singular biggest fundraising venture of its kind ever seen in English football. Thus in 2020, twenty-nine years after leaving the original Plough Lane site what the club called the "Greatest Story in Football" was complete, as AFC Wimbledon returned to their spiritual home in a campaign orchestrated, controlled and largely funded by their own supporters (AFC Wimbledon, 2022; Digital:Works, 2022).

NIALL AND PLOUGH LANE: A PORTRAIT

As outlined in the historical context above, Wimbledon's spiritual home – the Plough Lane stadium – has gone through three stages. First, there was an initial period of settlement, during which Plough Lane was a home stadium for the club and its supporters. Then came a period of exile, during which the club was forced away from its home stadium and community in Merton. Finally, the supporters themselves drove a campaign to re-build the club from the ashes and move it back to Plough Lane. This tripartite history is illustrated by an oral history carried out with Niall Couper, a life-long Wimbledon supporter. Having supported the club since the age of 8, Niall was a prominent member of the resistance to the club's move and a member of the Wimbledon Independent Supporters' Association (WISA). His contributions included running and editing the 'protest fanzine' Yellow and Blue during the 2001-02 protest season, twice being elected to the Dons' Trust Board and running the PR for the successful bond scheme which allowed AFC Wimbledon to move into their new Plough Lane stadium. Niall's oral history charts how the relationship of AFC Wimbledon supporters to the home space of Plough Lane shifted across the three stages of home, exile, and return. Niall's story is particularly important in showing how the original Plough Lane's stadium acted as 'lieu de mémoire', a site of nostalgia which actively helped to shape and drive supporters' activist agenda – specifically in the most significant move of the club back to Plough Lane.

Figure 5. Sign directing spectators to the new Plough Lane Stadium (officially named the Cherry Red Records Stadium for sponsorship reasons) down Batsford way, named in honour of one of Wimbledon's all-time great managers – 29-02-23 (Author's Own).

THE WIMBLEDON PLOUGH LANE JOURNEY: DEVELOPING THE HOME-STADIUM RELATIONSHIP

In his work exploring Millwall FC as a reference point for marginalised working-class people in London, Ole Jensen suggests that their stadium – The Den – acts as a lieu de memoire, a space imbued with emotive and symbolic significance (Nora, 1989) – the crystallisation of a community's organic memories of the past into a physical monument (Wood, 1999). For Jensen, stadia are such spaces - acting as containers of nostalgic memories of the club's history and providing supporters with an anchor to a geographical space (Jensen, 2022). The oral history with Niall Couper strongly corroborates Jensens' characterisation of stadia as lieu de mémoire. Specifically, what emerged from the interview with Niall was a sense that the now demolished Old Plough Lane stadium resonated with him as a particularly salient place. As outlined by Giulianotti, football is useful for forging memories both at a personal and collective level. On the one hand, football may contribute to how individuals relate to home cities, ethnicities, gender, public life, and culture or help map significant moments in a person's life. Conversely, football can also generate collective memories, around which collective identities and solidarities are (re)made over time (Giulianotti, 2019). This chimes strongly with contemporary scholarship of home, which emphasises how home is at once personal and social, playing host to both individuals and wider social groups, such as families or communities (Mallett, 2004). Niall's oral history is an important account in this respect, establishing a link between personal memories of the Old Plough Lane and their connection both to family and friends, as well as to the wider collective memories of the ground and the club's history (fig. 6).

Old Plough Lane as a Lieu de Memoire: Niall's Oral History	
Personal Memory	**Collective Memory**
"And then you go into the West Bank, the West Bank, felt like as a little kid, this massive terrace going up into the heavens, with all the people in the back singing all their crazy songs and stuff."	"On the West Bank, and that kind of... Just the, the sense of belonging, you have about going to a football ground, about walking through and it's like people wearing your colours...when you go to football, and particularly in those days, you know, it's like that's a whole ground of friends."
"This is where I'd been a mascot, as a kid, you know...running out onto the pitch...what would I have been – 9? It just seemed like this massive...cathedral, as you went out. Walking out, and going to kick the ball against Dave Beasant in goal, in front of the West Bank... phenomenal."	"And the players...you could see...there was an inner strength from playing at Plough Lane, because of the arrogance it often caused from other teams, when they came to play us."
"I was a season ticket holder. You just go through, and it was just like, you know, we had our own little spot just, on the south side, the south side of the West Bank. [I'd] sit there with my brother and a couple of other people."	"I think, if you could speak to a lot of Wimbledon fans, if they were picking a game to really remember from Plough Lane, it's when we beat them 5-1, you know, at Plough Lane. And it was...wonderful, that sort of memory that you have...erm...you know, turning those sorts of clubs over."

Figure 6. Oral History testimony from Niall Couper – evidencing that the Old Plough Lane acts as a lieu de memoire, which encompasses both personal and collective memories 14-02-23 (Author's Own).

In this context, an important question to ask is how the club's exile from Plough Lane impacted on Niall's relationship with the ground. Michael Allen Fox argues that the destruction or forced removal of home(s) amounts to the act of erasing of identity, culture and memory. In other words, destroying a community's home means to destroy memory itself (Allen Fox, 2016). Interestingly, Niall's oral history suggests the inverse may be true. Niall's testimony clearly outlines that Wimbledon's forced removal from Plough Lane was an incredibly traumatic event, both personally for Niall, and for the AFC Wimbledon community at large (fig. 7). However, the forced removal of Wimbledon FC from Plough Lane doesn't seem to have erased Niall's memories of the Old Plough Lane, as much as crystallise them. Specifically, I would contend that the experience of loss engendered by Wimbledon supporters' exile from Plough Lane made the Old Plough Lane more salient as a lieu de memoire by infusing the space with an enhanced sense of nostalgia. Here, I define nostalgia as a yearning for a positively evaluated past in juxtaposition with a negatively evaluated present (Mah, 2009). We can see Niall's nostalgia for the historic atmosphere, sense of home, sense of belonging and being in a space which enabled his identification as a fan of Wimbledon – all projected onto Plough Lane. Niall draws on his own individual and collective memories of Plough Lane and compares them against a traumatic sense of loss engendered by being exiled from the club's spiritual home (fig. 7). This contradicts Allen Fox's claim that the loss of home equates to the loss of memory. Rather, it seems that home may actually acquire added layers of emotional meaning or resonance through experiences of trauma and loss (Cieraad, 2010).

Niall's Reflections on the Wimbledon supporters' exile from Plough Lane	
Trauma	**Nostalgia**
"But it was definitely looking at the ground and thinking that it was going to be gone. We never had the chance to say a proper farewell...erm...I think that were really significant."	"...it was just kind of that smoky, excellent, you know, kind of almost romantic view I have of it..."
"And I remember, for years and years, I never drove – I never went past the ground. After it got knocked down, I refused, I just couldn't face it. And the very, very first time, I went past, and it was just really emotional just to see it like – gone. You know, and it's just like, I just wasn't ready for it at all."	"There was something like uniquely magical about that stadium...I can't describe why or anything like that, but it just kind of clicked... It was such a unique little stadium... a crappy little ground, really, I suppose looking back on it, but it felt so homely..."
"I think back to the tears, and I'd half-forgotten the tears of leaving...I found that so hard. Just looking at it and going – this is where I'd been a mascot, as a kid, you know, running out onto the pitch."	"Because...the unique story at Wimbledon is obviously that we disappeared to Selhurst Park, and at Selhurst Park, the difference at Selhurst Park was that you...you were a customer...we were fans at Plough Lane."

Figure 7. Oral history testimony from Niall Couper – evidencing how the trauma of Wimbledon's forced exile from the Old Plough Lane Stadium generated a sense of nostalgia for the Old Stadium – 14-02-23 (Author's own).

That brings us onto the final stage of Wimbledon's Plough Lane journey – the return. As outlined in the historical context section, after the club's ownership moved the original Wimbledon FC to Milton Keynes, the supporters themselves refounded the club back in London as AFC Wimbledon. This meant that since 2002, the club's future has been in the hands of AFC Wimbledon supporters who have directly controlled the club. As Niall outlined in his testimony, the dream to return to Plough Lane was written into the very foundation of the new club:

"I got elected onto the Dons Trust Board very early on...in AFC Wimbledon's journey, and I was...erm...er...remember we set a bunch of goals and aims for the club... one was, to get a ground back at Plough Lane. [Alongside getting back into the Football League that was] probably 1 and 2 on our aims..."

The realisation of that goal in 2020 was the culmination of huge fundraising and volunteering efforts from individuals amongst the Wimbledon supporting community. However, what is most interesting about Niall's story is the way in which supporters' memories of the Old Plough Lane space actively informed, drove and shaped their efforts to move the club back to the site. Consider these extracts from Niall's oral history:

"I think Plough Lane was absolutely instrumental...because...erm... the football authorities were very negative about Plough Lane, and very negative about saying that this was not a ground that was suitable for topflight football, and it needed to change...there was this, kind of, real disdain from the authorities...

I think...weirdly, as a group of fans...once you'd become a Wimbledon fan, it'd then become very much in your blood, because the general football community had disdain for Wimbledon. So it meant...you...I suppose this is the strength of us going further forward. The people that were left...our core, was very strong. Which meant that when somebody says, "right, your club shouldn't be here, it should be moved", that there was a very strong resistance to that. And that, ethos, probably meant that we were better placed to restart...

... [the campaign to move back to Plough Lane] was the recreation of the community we'd lost. That was the Plough Lane fans, that was the people who remembered what it was like – the adversity, remembering what it was like being called these raggedy-muffin people. And it was like us putting two fingers up again, and saying, "look, you didn't like us in the first place, now here we are, saying like...football authorities, we're just not gonna have this."

These excerpts outline one of the key narrative tropes unfolding in Niall's oral history: the portrayal of Wimbledon's journey back to the Plough Lane site as a unique anti-establishment, collective effort of AFC Wimbledon supporters. Crucially, Niall roots the development of such anti-establishment sentiment to the bond between Wimbledon fans in the Old Plough Lane space. Niall cites the old stadium's decrepit, rough, and widely chastised nature as key in creating a spirit of defiance and remarkable will amongst Wimbledon supporters. In other words, according to Niall, the anti-establishment, underdog, "us vs them" mentality which came to define the AFC Wimbledon's fanbase and drove them to rebuild the Plough Lane stadium was forged in the original Plough Lane space. What's even more significant, is how those same memories have become physically manifest in the structure of the new stadium – and therefore have been preserved and passed down inter-generationally, to a younger AFC Wimbledon fan base with limited experience and memory of the long struggle to return to the ground:

"what's great is – now there is lots of artwork around it that all celebrates our journey and our history and the traditions, which had been forgotten at Selhurst Park."

Crucially, according to Niall, the presence of murals, painting and artwork depicting the club's historic achievements and celebrating the club's journey and unique ownership model, has helped new generations of AFC Wimbledon fans connect to the club's anti-establishment identity:

"...what's interesting is with the younger fans, is that still sense of defiance. That still sense of like – we are different, and we're making a stand – and there is a sense of like, it means something."

Figure 8. Photograph taken of a mural at Plough Lane during a site visit for AFC Wimbledon vs Stevenage FC – "Playing Back at Plough Lane Where They Belong" 28-02-23 (Author's Own).

As outlined by David Goldblatt, the popularity of football spectatorship is rooted in a desire for narrative, a longing for association or involvement in stories which can help establish a sense of identity against a wider context of increasing social change (Goldblatt, 2015). Niall's quotes reveal how the New Plough Lane is enlisted in symbolising and imbuing such a narrative to the club's supporters. The site seems to act as much as a lieu de mémoire as the Old Plough Lane site, becoming a continuance of the old stadium in that sense. It is a structure which actively celebrates (through artwork, murals, and the provision of community spaces for Wimbledon supporters to gather) and stands as a monument to the unique story of Wimbledon's journey back to Plough Lane. This means that new, younger generations of Wimbledon supporters have a location to connect to the history of the club and become part of that community memory. This is despite having no lived experience of the Old Plough Lane site, where the memories, identity and community spirit associated with being a Wimbledon fan were originally forged.

CONCLUSION

Upon their return to the Plough Lane site, AFC Wimbledon released a special photographic edited journal, featuring reflections from Wimbledon supporters, players, staff, local politicians – and of every individual who had played a significant role in returning the club to the Plough Lane site. The title of this volume – "We Are Home" – is perhaps the perfect expression of the simple truth that to Wimbledon supporters, Plough Lane is a spiritual home space (Dunn, 2020). But beyond this fact, what does the unique journey of Wimbledon, away from and back to Plough Lane, and Niall's reflections on this journey tell us about the nature of home? Seemingly, it is that rather than representing a passive home space, Plough Lane has helped to create, contour, and galvanise an entire community around a shared set of principles, which arguably have manifested in one of the most significant footballing political projects of the 21st century.

As outlined by Allen Fox, home – and indeed, the mind work associated with home – is one of the crucial conduits through which an individual's political viewpoint is forged. A home has navigational significance, it is a crucial location from which one's own political direction and agency are formed (Allen Fox, 2016). I propose that Wimbledon's journey back to Plough Lane is a visceral display of how memory discourses – in this case a memory discourse about a specific home – can become central to individuals and communities agency and ability to imagine and create their own future (Huyssen, 2003). The evidence I gathered from Niall and my visits to Plough Lane demonstrates how memories of and nostalgia for a former home can fuel, shape and manifest an activist agenda in the present. Here, Niall's and other supporters' nostalgia for returning home to Plough Lane, sparked political action, resulting in extensive community action, fundraising and lobbying to rebuild their football club. More than this, the shared memories of the supporters, forged and mapped onto in the Old Plough Lane stadium as a nostalgic lieu de mémoire have actively shaped the development of the New Plough Lane site. In this way, the new Plough Lane has become a manifestation of the values and memories of AFC Wimbledon as a supporters' owned football club, and provided a space for newer, younger generations of fans to connect to the anti-establishment identity of the club itself (Allen Fox, 2016).

These dynamics account to a form of "progressive nostalgia" (Smith, 2020), as a critically positive interpretation of the past which can engender progressive political action in the present. In a context where specialist football museums, and sports heritage institutions more generally, are widely criticised for offering nostalgic, celebratory, jingoistic interpretation – often leaning on "golden age" tropes – this striking example of the intersections between memory and nostalgia for community action is highly significant (Vamplew, 1998; Moore, 2022). In short, this case study not only highlights the centrality of nostalgia to football culture but it also suggests a future for museum collecting around football which actively embraces nostalgia as progressive force. Undertaking oral history-led, lived experienced focused collecting projects may offer a pathway to reveal how nostalgia can involve a deeply critical reflection of the past, and turn into an operational tool through which communities can imagine themselves in the present and future.

THE WORLD CUP IN LONDON: HOMES AWAY FROM HOME

Contemporary football fandom is an expressive lifestyle. It is not only practiced on matchdays in the stadium, but in a variety of different spaces (Barnes, 2022). Though stadia are the most frequently studied spaces of football spectatorship, the unholy trinity of digitalisation, globalisation and neoliberalism has driven the emergence of new physical and digital spaces specifically designed for football spectatorship (Redhead, 2019). These include what geographer John Bale would characterise as "footballing third spaces". Building on Bhabha's and Soja's previous work on third space theory (see Bhabha, 2004; Soja, 1996), Bale argues that these spaces – enabled by the increased possibility of digital broadcast of football matches – lie between the stadium and the domestic realm. They can be defined as semi-public places where people gather with the explicit intention of watching football (Soja, 1996; Bale, 1998), which may encompass pubs, parks, social clubs, and community centres. The attraction of "third spaces" lies in their ability to generate communal experiences in the moment that specific football matches are taking place (Bale, 1998; Weed, 2007). Both digital and physical third spaces of football spectatorship allow supporters to engage with football on a scale beyond the local strengthening a sense of belonging to an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983). This takes on vital importance in a global city like London, which is home to hundreds of diasporic communities.[3]

As outlined by Anderson, nations operate as key, and often totalising, nodes of identity for many individuals. Despite representing arbitrary and constructed polities, nations achieve this special status by presenting themselves as coherent, distinct, superior and whole (Appiah, 2018; Anderson, 1983). A key tool for achieving this is the use of culture. For those who identify with specific national identities, engagement in distinctive ways of life, traditions, and cultural forms is a crucial tool for making national identity appear real in the imagination (Anico and Peralta, 2009; Clifford, 1997). The global sporting system is an ideal cultural tool for cementing national identity (Giulianotti, 1999; Lechner, 2007). Indeed, if the nation is an imagined community, sports, specifically football, can take on huge power in performing the nation; with the imagined community of millions "[seeming] more real as a team of eleven named people" (Hobsbawm, 1992, p. 143). As a result, sport – can be seen as a nation building technology – a powerful cultural asset which is able to make national identities real. Major international tournaments – such as the World Cup, played in Qatar over the final weeks of 2022 offers an interesting case study in this respect.[4] It is no surprise that during the tournament, diasporic communities across London used the city's 'third spaces' to watch the tournament, turning the World Cup into an opportunity to gather with fellow members of their community to support their nation's football team.

As outlined by Koser, a diasporic community is a group of people who share a similar heritage and a homeland and have often moved to various places across the world (Koser, 2007). The process of leaving a homeland behind may cause an individual trauma, sorrow, or rupture of identity, with many members of diasporic communities longing to eventually return to their 'homeland'. As outlined by Ahmed, in a context of migration, home is most commonly a space of belonging, with clearly defined, fixed boundaries, within which the subject is at rest and comfortable (Ahmed, 1999). However, by their very definition, diasporic communities face huge challenges in cultivating a sense of home owing

3 Though this project is concerned with working with two diasporic communities which are attached to specific nation states – Morocco and the Netherlands – it is important to note that diasporic communities often do not simply map onto nations.

4 It is worth noting that the 2022 World Cup in Qatar was a highly controversial tournament. This controversy centred on allegations of corruption during the bidding process, human rights abuses during the construction of stadia as well as the country's illegalisation of homosexuality and poor record on women's rights. For more information see the following – referenced in the Works Cited section (Amnesty International, 2022; Coleman, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

to the fact that they are physically removed from their homeland and find themselves in a different cultural context. Crucially, within these new cultural contexts migrant communities are often forced to assimilate into the dominant culture and lack spaces beyond the domestic realm to articulate their own diasporic identities and cultures (Buciek and Juul, 2008; Tunbridge, 2008).

As outlined by Ikalovic and Chiesi (2019), place and mobility can no longer be considered oppositional forces. In a context where individuals are more mobile than ever before, the establishment of a sense of home, both physically and socially is less about roots in one specific locale, and more about routes. In other words, identity and the meaning of place is drawn more from behaviours and routines across and between space-time, rather than in or at specific sites (Blunt, 2007; Creswell, 2013). This means that these feelings of comfortability and rest generated in the diasporic home tend to be expressed through behavioural and performative elements of homemaking. In other words, a member of a diasporic community may use a number of strategies from their own cultural repertoire to recreate a sense of home.

During my time following diasporic communities during the World Cup, language, food and material culture were the primary community identity drivers which transformed spaces into temporary homeland environments (Baker, 2019; McGillivray and McLaughlin, 2019). This suggests that it is not merely the gathering of a specific diaspora community within a footballing space which transforms said space into a temporary home. Rather, it is the behaviours, actions, and interactions of said community – both with the space and with each other – which creates these temporary sites of home-feeling.

Figure 9. A Dutch fan stops outside for a cigarette ahead of De Hems' screening of the Netherlands vs USA World Cup Round of 16 game – 03/01/23 (Author's own).

THE WORLD CUP CASE STUDIES: DE HEMS AND GOLBORNE ROAD

My work during the World Cup was based in two sites, working with London's Dutch and Moroccan communities respectively.

With regards to the Dutch community, I focused on De Hems Dutch Café Bar, on Macclesfield Street in the heart of Soho. De Hems is London's only Dutch pub, which boasts an extensive programme of cultural events including screening Champions League football for Dutch supporters (Briggs, 2010). During big international tournaments, the pub becomes the central hub for the Dutch football supporting community. Rather than remaining with the Netherlands throughout the tournament – I decided to remain pro-active in seeking out further case studies, to provide a comparative framework to my observations. As the tournament progressed – Morocco became the most prominent story of the World Cup, being the first African and Arab side to progress as far as the semi-final, beating pre-tournament favourites Spain and Portugal. After the Netherlands were knocked out of the tournament in the quarterfinals by eventual winners Argentina, I focused my work in Kensington and the Moroccan community around Golborne Road. Today, the area is known for its history of activism, independent traders, and diverse ethnic make up. Its connection to Morocco can be traced back to the 1960s, when a large number of Moroccans from around Larache and Tangiers moved to London, largely to take up chef or cleaning jobs in West End hotels (Golborne Stories Project, 2014; Vague, 2020). Today this connection manifests most obviously through cafes and market shops along the Golborne Road which has led some to dub the area as "Little Morocco" (Ullah, 2022). My specific chosen space on Golborne Road was the community centre of the charity Making Communities Work and Grow Community (MCWG) at the bottom of Trellick Tower which was screening Morocco's games. The charity was founded by mostly North African local community activists with the aim to undertake community engagement projects in the area and to tackle issues such as knife crime and domestic violence (MCWG, 2023).

In the following sections, building upon my fieldwork notes I will discuss how both the Dutch and Moroccan communities used transient third spaces of football fandom as a stage to establish simulacra of their imagined homelands. Specifically, I will discuss this in the context of the language spoken and food and drinks consumed, and the material culture mobilised to construct a sense of community identity.

LANGUAGE, FOOD AND DRINKS

First, language. Unsurprisingly, the crowds gathered at both at De Hems pub and MCWG community centre were overwhelmingly Dutch and Moroccan respectively. Naturally, this is reflected in the soundscapes and videos I recorded, with the majority of people speaking in their respective mother tongue as supposed to English: Darija (the dialect of Arabic spoken in Morocco) at MCWG and Dutch at De Hems. At De Helms, bar staff even referred to me in Dutch assuming I was a Dutchman. The presence of the Dutch language in the space was reinforced by several popular songs being played, the most notable of which was *Viva Hollandia* which instigated several singalongs during the game. As outlined by Cieraad and Hecht, language – or rather communicating with others in a shared language is a key enabler and tenet of social bonding, and by extension the establishment of a home-like feeling (Hecht, 2001; Kraszewski, 2008; Cieraad, 2010). Straightforwardly, speaking a common language is a shorthand for shared cultural understandings and enables a sense of solidarity. This is particularly significant for diasporic communities as they typically face huge pressure to assimilate into their new countries. This explains why second generation migrants tend to use their parents' mother tongues only as second languages (Tunbridge, 2008). Many times, the use of the mother tongue might be limited to the domestic sphere. Against this backdrop, retaining their own language enables community members not only to maintain and nurture relationships and connections to family and friends in their homeland, but also to actively engage in shared cultural performances with fellow community members (Allen Fox, 2016).

At the same time, speaking a shared language was not the only way in which supporters established a sense of solidarity in the third spaces. The food and drinks consumed also played a part in evoking their respective homelands. In his work with diasporic sports supporting communities in Texas, Kraszewski notes how people from Pittsburgh now living in Texas gathering to watch Pittsburgh's NFL team (known as 'the Steelers), re-created a sense of home by consuming Pittsburgh craft beers "Steel City" and "Pierogi", the latter being a reference to Pittsburgh's Eastern European migration heritage (Kraszewski, 2008). During my two visits to De Hems, and my visit to the MCWG centre – I observed similar patterns. The management teams at both De Hems and MGCW served traditional Dutch and Moroccan food and drinks, such as *Amstel*, *Brouwerij Uiltje* and *La Trappe Trappist's Dubbel* beers at De Hems and sugared mint tea and bowls of *harira* – a hearty chickpea and tomato soup at MCWG. The combined effect of diasporic languages becoming the lingua franca within the third spaces, and the mass engagement in culturally specific consumption patterns resulted in the creation of a sense of solidarity and comfort among people attending. Engaging in culturally-specific behaviours related to language, food, and drink established a profound sense of commonality amongst the communities I worked with and represented an opportunity to engage with specific cultural elements outside of the domestic realm (Pearson, 2014; Buciek and Juul, 2008).

Figure 10. A peek behind the bar at the selection of Dutch beers available at De Hems – 01-12-22 (Author's Own).

Figure 11. An orange wall: fans crowd together, wearing Dutch national team replica jerseys during one of the author's visits to De Hems – a screening of the Netherlands vs USA in the World Cup Round of 16; 01-12-23 (Author's Own).

MATERIAL CULTURE

However, whilst participants used a shared language, food and drink to create sense of belonging, I would argue that material culture played a particularly significant role in transforming these spaces into home-land environments.

This manifested in slightly different ways across both sites. At De Hems, the interior of the pub was decorated with national flags, football memorabilia and, most crucially, the overwhelming number of people who were wearing national team replica jerseys.[5] Even more interesting was the proliferation of "retro" shirts many of which associated with the golden era of Dutch football, the 1970s and 80s (Lechner, 2007). In his work on diasporic long-distance fandom and home, Baker further explains the emotional and psychological effect of wearing team shirts in footballing spaces. Baker argues that by wearing a replica shirt whilst watching a team from a long-distance, one literally inscribes their fandom directly onto their body – providing a clear marker of belonging and support (Baker, 2019). In essence, the widespread wearing of bright orange replica kits acts as a "uniform"; functioning as a call for community and belonging, generating a sense of shared national pride. Crucially, Baker argues that this act of bodily inscription is ultimately "place-making", temporarily transforming any shared space where people are dressed in this replica kit uniform into a "home" (Baker, 2019).

Another way in which material culture contributed to perform a home-making function was through the widespread use of national flags across both sites. Dutch flags were hung above the pubs' sign outside De Hems and drew in a huge number of Dutch supporters walking around Soho wearing the famous *oranje* jersey. This trend was far more noticeable in Golborne Road, where flags were daubed onto the landscape around the MCWG community centre and in several locations between the Trellick Tower and the bottom of Golborne Road. Overall, on the day of the semi-final I counted 11 establishments including food trucks, market stalls and scaffolding sites displaying Moroccan flags (see fig. 13). The feeling of being surrounded by Moroccan flags was enhanced by the fact that several vehicles - such as vans and cars – and people passing through the area were also draped with or wrapped in Moroccan flags. Moroccan flags had both the effect of heightening the visibility of the Moroccan community in the area, and to act as a stage setting to the significant media coverage. As a result of Morocco team's remarkable run to the World Cup's semi-final, there was a huge spike in interest in the Golborne Road around the latter stages of the tournament. This was heightened after the quarter final, when Morocco beat Portugal and video footage of Moroccans attending public screenings in Golborne Road and revelling around Edgware Road went viral (Duncan, 2022; Khan, 2022).

As outlined by Shields (1991), sports media essentially functions to over-simplify readings of a specific place. In other words, a singular team comes to represent one specific area, in a way that neighbourhoods, towns, or cities are homogenised and reduced, writing out what may be a more complex urban lanscape (Shields, 1991, p. 47). During the World Cup – this trend was clearly present in the coverage of Morocco's journey to the semi-final, with media outlets widely portraying a simplified image of Golborne Road as "Little Morocco". This image of Golborne Road isn't inaccurate – the area is home to a notable array of artisan Moroccan cafes, supermarkets, and convenience shops, whilst recent census results show the area has a proportionally double the population concentration of North African, Arab, and African identifying citizens compared to the Kensington average. However, the area is also hugely diverse, with highly visible Central and West African and Caribbean communities, as well as deep historical associations with Portuguese and Spanish migrants (The Royal Borough and Kensington and Chelsea, 2014). The active inscription of Moroccan symbols onto the area, in conjunction with the wider media representations of Golborne Road, created the incorrect image of a Moroccan 'enclave' within

Figure 13. Mapping Moroccan flag displays on Golborne Road during fieldwork observations before the screening of Morocco's World Cup Semi-Final game vs France – 14/01/23 (Author's own).

5 Of the 150 people who were crammed into the capacity room, over 1/3 were wearing the oranje colours – including the pub management and bar staff on my second visit for a screening of the Netherlands' quarter final clash with Argentina. Coloured a distinctive bright orange colour, outside the pub the Dutch national jersey immediately marked individuals out as "Dutch", however within the pub, inscribing their national identity onto the bodies of the spectators.

Figure 12. Picture taken at Le Maroc grocers' shop on Golborne Road – showing how the shopkeeper has inscribed his national identity both on the front and within the shop itself, on the day of the semi-final 14-12-22 (Author's own).

Figure 14. A Moroccan street vendor outside Le Marrakech, Golborne Road, proudly displays his Moroccan flag on the day of the semi-final – 14-12-23 (Author's own).

London. Coverage also failed to acknowledge the significant challenges faced by communities in the area relating, such as the painful aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, the rampant gentrification, poverty and economic inequalities experienced by all sections of the community (The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, 2014).

CONCLUSION

So, how can the different behaviours of both Dutch and Moroccan fans be drawn together and how do they relate to the notion and construction of home? As outlined by Huyssen, in a globalised, hyper-mobile, liquid modern context, humanity has an increased need for temporal and geographical anchorage (Huyssen, 1995; Bauman, 2001). This problem is especially acute for members of diasporas, who straddle identities and cultures between their "homeland" and their new migratory homes, finding themselves physically removed from their homeland space – and often devoid of a settled sense of "home". The interesting paradox at play here is how the diasporic communities I worked with used the tools of globalisation and liquid modernity – mass movement of goods and products, digital communications, and media – in third spaces in London, to reconnect with and celebrate their own diasporic identities.

Evidently, throughout November and December 2022, pubs and community centres in London were crucial for London's diasporic communities experiences of the World Cup. It is also clear that whilst in these places, diasporic communities used their collective experience of watching football to engage in culturally specific behaviours which celebrated their community and individual identities. I suggest that the World Cup screenings provided more than just an opportunity to celebrate people's identities but had the primary function of constituting temporary "homelands" within London. As argued above – supporters exhibited highly culturally specific behaviours whilst watching World Cup fixtures in their third spaces, falling into the categories of language, food and drink and material culture. At De Hems, Dutch supporters spoke Dutch, sang Dutch football folk songs, consumed Dutch lager, and inscribed their Dutch identity onto the interior of the pub through flags, as well as onto their own bodies through orange national replica jerseys. In Golborne Road, similar behaviours were observable – with spectators speaking Darija whilst consuming Moroccan harira and mint tea. However, the Moroccan's inscription of their national identity went beyond the community centre, with supporters instead covering the area around Golborne Road with Moroccan flags and iconography. The ultimate effect of this behaviour – both within De Hems and around the Golborne Road area more generally – was the creation of a "homeland-like" environment. This transformed both De Hems and Golborne Road into perfect expressions of Ahmed's idea of a diasporic home – a bounded space of mutual belonging, comfortability, and expression of identity – providing communities with a sense of identity, rootedness and belonging (Ahmed, 1999; Lockford, 2016). Crucially, I would argue that the homogeneity, intensity, and all-encompassing nature of these expressions ultimately transformed the spaces into simulacra of their homeland, or a home away from home – for the duration of the spectator experience. In other words, through their specific behaviours whilst watching World Cup games, supporters transformed specific bounded spaces within London into transient, deterritorialised spaces for the expression of national community and identity.

HACKNEY WOMEN'S FC: HOME AS A SOCIAL SPACE

"For at the heart of Hackney is more than just the football. It's about a group of people who look after each other through the good times and the bad, on the pitch and off it. It's about the nights out, the singing, the club songs, the dancing, the Pride marches, pizza Sundays, Clacton. The stories, the memories, the histories, the relationships, the camaraderie – win or lose..."

Caz Ulley in Hackney Women's Football Club – 30 Years and Counting (Hackney Women's Football Club, 2016).

Both case studies have presented examples of how Londoners may generate a sense of home in relation to physical spaces – be that football stadia or third spaces respectively. For my final case study, I want to move the goalposts slightly, in a bid to show how a community in London has forged a sense of home around a specific set of relationships rather than a physical space. This case study reflects wider trends in scholarship centred on home, in which increasing attention is being paid to understanding home in relation to social relationships between individuals or members of a community. The implication of this 'relational turn' is the increasing acknowledgment that whilst home may always be located or formed through physical spaces, it is not necessarily fixed in space itself. It cannot simply be equated with shelter, houses, or households. Instead – as outlined by Douglas – it should be understood in terms of social relations or relationality between individual social actors (Douglas, 1991; Mallett, 2004). Crucially, this increasing pre-occupation with intangible homes – or home as a matter of social relations – has started to influence the limited scholarship on football and home. For example, in her seminal work focussed on football stadia as home, Charleston concludes by calling for scholars to focus less on bounded spaces as homes and more on the ways in which football can engender feelings of "being at home" (Charleston, 2009). This is echoed by Baker, who argues that home is as much an emotional construct and process than a physical reality (Baker, 2019). This last case study – Hackney Women's Football Club – in some ways represents a direct response to these scholarly contributions.

Though there is limited literature on how professional football clubs and their stadia may provide a home to specific geographic communities, there is even less work exploring how individuals may actively use grassroots football to create a sense of home around identity markers such as gender, sexual orientation, nationality, or ethnicity (Blackshaw, 2009; Bale, 2000; Cohen, 1985). By extension, if home is truly to be understood as a nexus of social relations, and not necessarily attached to any physical space – these communities might ultimately provide a "home" for the individual members of the team, as a place to feel comfortable, relaxed, supported, and included.

The case study chosen to explore home as a set of social relations is Hackney Women's Football Club (HWFC). HWFC has been an iconic node of London's queer scene since the club's foundation in 1986. The team is the first openly 'out' team in Europe, and the first women-run team in the UK (Sports Industry Group, 2023). The club's queer positive identity is written into the very foundational history of the club, created as a direct reaction to the anti-LBQTQ+ sentiment of Margaret Thatcher's conservative governments (Kheraj and Savile, 2019; Ulley, 2016). Though the team experienced significant prejudice, abuse and public scepticism in the years after its foundation, many of the teams which make up London's thriving gay football scene can trace their roots back to Hackney Women's (Bottomley, 2022; Sports Industry Group, 2023). Today, HWFC operates with three teams, gathering over 100 players and members from around North London.

How does this almost totemic role played by HWFC in the London LGBTQ+ community translate into helping players establishing a sense of home? If the club does provide its players with a sense of home, what is this sense of home rooted in?

As outlined in the introduction, during the time I spent with Hackney Women's FC I attended matches, training sessions, and conducted short interviews with four members of the team. In the four interviews, players did not ascribe any home-like status to – or any real strong emotional attachment with – the physical spaces where the team actually plays football, be that home pitch, training ground or others. Indeed, not one interviewee referenced their present or former grounds when asked about which aspects of the club "meant anything to them". This is despite the fact Hackney Women boasts two of the most historic grassroots football sites in London as their traditional homes – formerly Hackney Marshes, and now their current home, Douglas Eyre Park Playing Fields in Walthamstow.[6] The only time the interviewees referred to physical football spaces was in a generalised, abstracted sense. Take the following response from Megan, one of the players who was asked whether the home pitches and training grounds she and the team used on a weekly basis meant anything to her:

"I've played football growing up, since I was about 7, so I feel totally at home on a football pitch – I feel like...I know it, it feels a bit like a part of me, a second home. You hear about people who do say – theatre, who say the stage is their home, and I'd say it's a similar feeling with me as a football player."

Here, Megan is not professing to have a strong connection to any specific site but is talking about football pitches more broadly as an abstract space for self-expression where she can feel at ease. This reduces the pitch– as Megan says – to a stage; the pitch's importance is limited to its utility, as a means to an end, ultimately enabling Megan's participation to the sport itself. This lack of preoccupation with the importance of physical spaces suggests that the sense of home generated by Megan's involvement with Hackney Women's FC is predicated on something more intangible: a set of relations, a social constellation, or membership to a symbolic community.

HACKNEY WOMEN'S FC: HOME AS A SPACE TO EXPRESS THE AUTHENTIC SELF

As outlined by Ellwood (2011) in her exploration of lesbian living spaces, a home space for minority or historically oppressed social groups is often a space where they are the subjects, rather than the objects . This theme similarly emerged in the interviews carried out with HWFC's players as demonstrated by the following quotes from Megan Kapadia (MK), the club's social media officer and Naomi Reed (NR) one of the players:

"I think the main thing really is that everyone – we make sure that in this space everyone is able to be their authentic selves and play football as their authentic selves." (MK)

"...Yeah – absolutely. It's a place that you can feel at ease, and yourself, and just enjoy your football." (NR)

6 Douglas Eyre Park has been used for football since 1896 and has historically played host to some of the country's most talented players as youth footballers, including 6 internationals – David Beckham, Sol Campbell, and Paul Ince among them (Inglis, 2014). For more information on Hackney Marshes, see the historical context section of this report.

Figure 15. Hackney Women's FC's right-back takes a throw in during their home match against Brentford – 05/03/23 (Author's own).

An important driver of feeling at home at the HWFC is linked to a feeling or sentiment of homogeneity. As outlined by Duyvendak, familiarity is one of home's key defining aspects, however it is not sufficient to establish a sense of home. Instead, homogeneity of either people or places is crucial. In other words, to truly feel at home, one must feel that they are with their own people (Duyvendak, 2011; Lockford, 2016). This perception of homogeneity was primarily expressed by a sense of safety derived from sharing a similar lived experience as queer people. This is evident in the quotes below from both Megan Kapadia and Logan DeFranco (LD) respectively:

MK: "whilst not everyone here is queer – the majority of the base, I'd say about 90% of us are, and I think we all share that"

LD: "[Actually someone said to me] 'there's a queer team, in Hackney, that you should look into and try and join'...being able to play on a queer team, with other queer people and trans people has been really nice, to know that there is like a haven of sorts, for us to play football."

This perceived sense of homogeneity at Hackney Women's was not limited to the players' gender or sexual orientation, but extended to a wider set of shared values, ranging from a desire to champion women's football alongside a strong "self-improvement" ethic, and the desire to encourage each other to give their best on the pitch (fig 17).

Interviewee	Championing Women's Football	Collective Self-Improvement Ethic
Megan	"We all have our...we all love football, and we all wanna champion women's football"	"I think ultimately, everybody wants the best out of everyone else, and everybody is here for the good of the club, which is just brilliant."
Nikita	"[it's a place] to push for equity in the game, like against men, but also like – what does it mean to be inclusive as a woman's club now?"	"Erm...[Hackney Women's is] a place to compete, to test yourself against some really good players"
Logan	"Growing up and playing football, and especially girls football – I think I felt like I fit in and I think it's important that all women feel like they can have that space"	"There's something so fun about being competitive with other people...it's both a place of comfort, and also a place of like – being pushed"

Figure 17. Table of extracts from my interviews with three players from Hackney Women's FC – displaying their shared political values (Author's own).

Arguably, the single biggest theme to emerge from the interview data was less about the sport itself, and more about the social interactions and strong social bonds forged by the players. In her 2013 autobiographical article, *Finding My Place: A Sports Odyssey*, LGBTQ+ historian Susan Cahn recounts her experiences of using sport to establish a sense of community, as a lesbian woman. In this work, she refers to her time playing for openly lesbian softball teams in Santa Cruz, California, and Minnesota. In a similar vein with what emerged in the research with HWFC, Cahn emphasises that the significance of these environments lies in them being "queer spaces", which enable people to feel a sense of ownership and agency over and within the team, and to feel empowered to physically express oneself. However, Cahn crucially asserts that being part of a demographically homogenous lesbian community is only satisfying if it is predicated on two conditions: tangibility and sociality. In other words, being part of a sporting lesbian community only leads to a sense of belonging, if the women involved feel able to express themselves physically, and if participation itself leads directly to relationships of value (Cahn, 2013).

Tellingly, this is a theme which was touched upon by all four interviewees. Indeed, both descriptive and value coding of the interview data gathered with Hackney Womens' players showed the club's role in providing "sociality" or the development of meaningful relationships. As outlined by Naomi:

"it's been really all about the people and the camaraderie between the team and the people ...[those] kind of social things... it's helping us develop as a team... everyone goes for a drink after games, sometimes after training...it's quite special"

Or as team member Logan DeFranco explains:

"Getting to ride in the car with them to different football games, or on the bus to practice – it's been really nice. Just the casual conversation you get to talk about and the inside jokes you build immediately from being on this shared sports team."

Such is the importance of the sociality and social scene at the heart of the football club, that one of the interviewees – who has requested to remain nameless – even suggested that the team's on pitch performance actively suffers as a result:

Figure 16. Hackney Women's FC players encourage each other as they leave the pitch at half-time during their match against Brentford – 05/03/23 (Author's own).

"I think more than that – it has its good things and its bad things. I think sometimes, it's a bit too much of a home for some players... and it should be more of a club...erm, but for a lot of people it's their only social circle, so I understand that as well. So it's kind of a double edged sword right – does the need to be less of a social circle, more of a club? But then it does provide home and opportunities people."

Perhaps most telling, this was conveyed by the use of the word 'family' which was mobilised by two of the four interviwees to describe the meaning asvcribed to Hackney Women's FC. As a contextual point – it is important to note that "family" is often how LGBTQ+ people may refer to each other. Being family may take on the meaning of being queer in slang and provides an example of how the LGBTQ+ community may create alternative non-biological extended family units. At the same time, rather than attempting to normalise their friendships as positive and uncomplicated, both Megan and Logan recognise that family matters often carry a degree of complication:

MK: "And obviously like, we have our dysfunctions like any family does, but I think ultimately, everybody wants the best out of everyone else, and everybody is here for the good of the club, which is just brilliant."

LD: "There are times that we bicker as if we are family, like, people do things that kind of tick each other off, but it's all out of caring for like each other and doing well in football, and nothing is ever really malicious towards each other. But yeah, there's that sense of almost like...siblings...within it? Kind of picking at each other, making fun of one another, or really just being annoying – but at the same time, we all really care for each other and that's really comforting."

CONCLUSION

This work with Hackney Women's Football Club represents an ideal case study of how home can be increasingly seen to be rooted in intangible social relationships rather than physical places, and furthermore how such interpretations may manifest in relation to football communities. Interviews with Hackney's players ultimately revealed how a symbolic community has seemingly developed amongst the players involved at the club – in other words, a community whose boundaries are defined by intangible social values (Cohen, 1985). It is true that this community seems to be fundamentally based on two phenomena. First is the perceived "homogeneity" of their members – in other words, the fundamental shared lived experiences, and values of the membership. The second is the deep, personal relationships which emerge between the players through their involvement in the team. In this context, football itself largely seems to play second fiddle to the team members' accounts of the social activities. These activities – the drinking sessions, casual conversation, in-jokes, team-bonding seem to be the sinews which make Hackney Women's FC a home for its community of players.

Crucially, this reinforces an interpretation of home as "people who matter" rather than a specific physical space – as more rooted in relationships or networks, than physical spaces or places (Allen Fox, 2016). My interviewees eschewed the idea that the physical spaces in which the club players are more important to their sense of being home than spending time embedded within the social networks or alternative family structures the club provides. This interpretation doesn't constitute an attempt to undermine the importance of physical spaces in the formation of home. After all, Hackney Women's FC still requires their home pitch in Walthamstow, their training ground, pubs, social clubs where to actually meet and socialise. Rather, it instead represents a call to focus more on how shared social relationships, behaviours and belief systems may not only draw together individuals into what Cohen describes as "symbolic communities", but crucially help them to establish a sense of home.

Figure 18. Hackney Women's FC Second XI put their hands up together after a pre-match teamtalk before their fixture vs Brentford – 05/03/23 (Author's Own).

FOOTBALL AND HOME IN LONDON: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Since I began this project in the autumn of 2022, I have travelled across London in the pursuit of finding the city's footballing soul. I've scaled the city from Walthamstow to Chislehurst, watching top-tier football in elite level stadia as well as amateur games on local parks, drinking craft beer with Dutch fans and sipping mint tea with Moroccan fans. I've seen football's power to unite communities, empower minoritised groups and provide respite, joy and meaning to the lives of Londoners. Above all, I have seen just how varied and vibrant football is as a cultural phenomenon in London. The stories and interviews I documented not only tell a story of the lived experiences of ordinary Londoners but paint a picture of a city where football – in its various forms – is a constant, potent, and vital cultural presence. Simply, London may not only be the capital of the UK, but the UK's capital of football.

At the same time, the aim of my project was not only to document the lived experience of London footballing communities, but also to forward debates in scholarship and practice about the relation between "home" and football. I would therefore like to conclude this report by going back to the three questions which animated this research project.

- **Does football help different communities construct a (sense of) home in London? If so, how does this manifest?**
- **How do these conclusions contribute to the wider academic discussion around home more generally?**
- **What do my results suggest about the future for public facing football-based research and curation around football in the museum sector?**

Let's start with the first – and easiest to answer – of these three questions. The short answer is – yes, my research demonstrates that football is a key mechanism for the formation of "home" for various communities across London. In Wimbledon I saw how a stadium – the historic Plough Lane – represented a physical home space for a community of supporters. More than that, I observed how through its destruction, supporters drew on its power as lieu de mémoire to build a distinct identity, social values, and political agenda, ultimately weaponising their nostalgia for their old "home stadium" progressively, to build a new home – a club, a community of supporters and a new stadium made in their own image. During the World Cup, I saw how diaspora communities came together in footballing spaces, and in doing so created temporary "homelands", in which they could engage in collective celebration of their own cultures and identities, whilst spatially removed from their homelands. Finally, I witnessed how Hackney Women's FC provides a home for the queer community in North London, creating a safe space for the expression of the self, predicated on shared experiences and underpinned by the formation of meaningful social bonds.

But how do these conclusions contribute to wider academic discussions around home and football? In many ways, my explorations of football in London have re-affirmed the slippery nature of home, highlighting its inherently contradictory nature. At various points, my case studies have shown home to be both deeply personal but also collective, deeply nostalgic but also constructive, and about global networks as much as local roots. However, I believe that the true contribution this project makes to the literature around home can be outlined by synthesising my case study findings, and observing what characteristics were present in all three starkly different iterations of football as home. Though all three of my case studies were imbricated with physical "spaces" to varying degrees, what truly bound them was less a connection to these physical spaces, as much as the processes of creation,

sustenance and meaning-making which occurred within them. In other words – what binds all three of the case studies is that they encapsulate the meaning of home as a verb rather than a noun; a moving process, rather than a static object. In this context, it is therefore vital to look at the processes whereby communities actively and continually create home(s).

Whilst home can sometimes be a physical place, it can be more accurately rooted in activities which happen within either physical or abstract spaces (Jackson, 1995; Mallett, 2004). In all three case studies, what made them 'home' was the way in which they acted as a stage for social interactions and abstract social processes (Ikalovic and Chiesi, 2019). Whether it was a community of supporters drawing on their nostalgia for a lost physical space, diaspora communities using their own behaviour in the spaces to build temporary homelands, or a group of young footballers playing together in a bid to forge meaningful social relationships and express an authentic version of themselves – the image of home emerging from my project is a dynamic, fluid and often deterritorialised phenomenon. In this sense, it is not singularly a location, a sense of belonging, an emotion – but a lived, and continually negotiated process. The biggest academic contribution of this project, is the need shift the focus of sport studies towards 'home-making' as a continual process. This comes at the expense of traditional studies which merely examine how communities may build or exist within a home or on physical structures which represent homes in a singular sense which remains the dominant direction of the scholarship (Baker, 2019). Against a neoliberal backdrop where the notion of an established home is threatened by increased deterritoriality, mobility and unprecedented technological inter-connectedness, a focus on home as a process rather than a place, about "routes" more than "roots", is even more of an imperative (Ikalovic and Chiesi, 2019; Lockford, 2016; Bauman, 2001).

Building upon these insights, I will finally return to Phillips' analysis of sport representation in UK museums (2012), discussed in this reports' introduction, to draw some conclusions on how this study might contribute to this debate. Phillips argued that, despite the rapid increase in sports specialist museums across the country, non-specialist museums are yet to tap into the potential of football (and sports more generally). Museums have already proven an ideal space for reflecting on the relationship between culture and football and deferring cultural legitimacy onto football as a social phenomenon (Johnes and Mason, 2003). However, I believe it is time for more generalist museums to take the next step towards presenting football as culture. In other words, to truly encapsulate the value, vibrancy, and variety of football in contemporary London (and beyond), museums must move away from focussing on football as a siloed sport, and instead critically research, collect and display football as an important cultural field. Most centrally, this means integrating sports collecting within individual museums' programming and collection strategies. As outlined by Reilly, when museums have operated such shifts, as it was the case of the Wakefield Museum's 2015 exhibition on a local Slazenger Factory, this has led new dialogues with members of the local community who previously may not have taken a strong interest in the museum (Reilly, 2022). Here, collecting football as a serious, culturally situated phenomenon, can have the power to broaden interest in museums, increase visitor figures, whilst opening up new critical dialogues with and engagement opportunities with a wider array of communities, many of whom may not have connected with museums before (Phillips, 2012).

I believe that moving away from a focus on elite sportspeople, onto the lived experiences of fans, coaches, officials, and broader communities who engage with the game at all levels will help to situate football within more generalist collections, as well as to better represent the richness and diversity of football's cultural landscape (Johnes, 2008; Moore, 2013). This means embracing community-led collecting methods as a key tool. Finally, the richness added to my own data set by the work with Hackney Women's FC also re-affirms my view that museum's work focussed on football as culture should attempt to transcend the sport's traditional orientation towards cisgender, straight, white men. As outlined by Moore, collection and interpretation needs to be inclusive – in terms of gender, sexuality, and levels of educational attainment to challenge the prejudices which may become ingrained into the sport (Moore, 2022).

In his critical re-reading of C.L.R. James' seminal work *Pitch of Life*, Chris Searle draws on James to elucidate the potential cultural power of sport. Searle argues that James' writing on cricket doesn't merely suggest that cricket is a metaphor for life – but potentially – a lifestyle in and of itself. In other words, cricket is a cultural practice, which actively shapes how people live. Similarly, I would contend that this study illuminates that football takes on a similar role in London. Football remains a dominant cultural phenomenon across the city, ubiquitous in both popular and elite discourses, and as my case studies show, engages a huge variety of stakeholder communities (Goldblatt, 2015). Though my study has shown how different communities use football to create a (sense of) home, further scholarly research and practice is still needed in this area. I believe that contemporary collecting programmes like Curating London are an ideal pathway to explore how research and collecting focused on lived experience can profoundly shape museums and their collections.

Football transcends the realm of sport. It is time that its special status as a broker of lived experience is more widely recognised by museums and cultural organisations at large as a means to articulate a sense of home, identity, community and belonging which goes beyond geographical boundaries.

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