No harmony: football fandom and everyday multiculturalism in Western Sydney

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Abstract

This paper critically examines football (soccer) fandom as an important yet under-explored site for the production of new understandings of multiculturalism and cultural hybridization. Building on the analytical framework of everyday multiculturalism, we report on ethnographic research undertaken with football fans in Western Sydney, Australia, to analyze the interactions and conflicts between football fans and authorities that surrounded the 2014 Harmony Day celebrations. This paper argues that across the fabric of professional football in Australia, multiculturalism is lived in conflicting ways. It is shown that despite attempts by stakeholders of the game to promote a mainstream ‘family-friendly’ form of fandom, Western Sydney football fans create new forms of cross-cultural conviviality through their fandom practices that not only reshape their own identities but also challenge the country’s official, governmental discourse of multiculturalism and its attendant policies.

Keywords: football fandom; everyday multiculturalism; cultural diversity; sport
Introduction

Established in 2012, Western Sydney Wanderers Football Club (hereafter Wanderers) has been dubbed ‘one of the most remarkable success stories in Australian sport’ due in large part to ‘a fanatical multicultural following of South American, European, Asian, African and Middle Eastern fans’ (Rothfield 2012). The Wanderers have reportedly become ‘the envy of many sporting clubs as they tap into the power of multicultural western Sydney’ (Lehmann 2013). Since its inauguration, the club has attracted thousands of fans from the most culturally diverse area of Australia where football (soccer) has always been a cultural passion (Hallinan et al. 2007). Among these fans, there was a group made up mainly by young males who would bring to the stands a fandom style that was yet unknown to Australian sports fan cultures, hence modifying the panorama of the country’s sports fandom (Author 2016). The initial 40 or so members of what would become the Wanderers’ active support group – the Red & Black Bloc, hereafter RBB – used to share information about football online through WestSydneyFootball.com long before the club’s inception. In their virtual meetings, they talked about their dream of a top-level club to represent their region. They were the first to attend a series of community meetings that Football Federation Australia (FFA) organized throughout Western Sydney to discuss the creation of a new professional football club (Author 2016). Hence, when the FFA officially announced a new club to represent Western Sydney in the A-League, Australia’s national football league, this group was already organized to perform their football culture in the stadium, streets and pubs where they congregate.

In this paper, we investigate how multiculturalism is performed and challenged in the active fan subculture of the multicultural cohort of football fans who follow the Wanderers – the RBB. Building on a tradition of research on football fandom and social identity (Warren
1995; Hughson 1997, 1998; Hay 2002; Hallinan et al. 2007; Hallinan and Hughson 2008), this paper draws upon the theoretical framework of everyday multiculturalism (Colombo and Semi 2007; Harris 2009; Wise and Velayutham 2009; Colombo 2010) to interrogate ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the first author among the RBB. Our analysis will focus particularly on the 2014 Harmony Day, an official celebration of multicultural Australia. The main question this paper addresses is to what extent and how the micro-social practices and interactions of these football fans reflect or challenge the official, governmental discourse of multiculturalism and its attendant policies. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate the importance of sports fandom as a site for understanding young people’s lived experiences of multiculturalism. Until now very little research has been undertaken to understand how cultural diversity is experienced, performed and negotiated in the everyday lives of thousands of football fans within their growing and diversifying multicultural communities. This paper aims to partially fill this void by exploring how the football fandom performed by RBB members sheds light on micro-projects of civic participation where the production and contestation of multiculturalism occur through everyday practices.

The first part of this paper outlines the framework of everyday multiculturalism and its relation to the study of sports fandom. Next, we trace Western Sydney as one of the most culturally diverse areas in Australia, and the socio-historical role that football has had and continues to have within the region. This is followed by a succinct discussion of our methodological approach and the fieldwork undertaken for this study. As we discuss the singularities of the events surrounding the 2014 Harmony Day, we show how the everyday multicultural encounters of RBB members present a new site of contestation to the official multicultural discourse and its safeguards. The latter, of which Harmony Day is an instrument, operates within the governmental mechanisms for enhancing social cohesion, predicated on the assumption that cultural diversity involves the juxtaposition of multiple, distinct cultural
traditions (Noble 2011). As will be shown in this paper, Harmony Day is explicitly designed for displaying (tightly controlled) cultural difference but also for containing the messy complexity of cultural diversity, despite this complexity being at the heart of people’s daily experience of multiculturalism (Noble 2011; Harris 2013).

**Everyday multiculturalism and sports fandom**

Having been shaped by successive waves of immigration from diverse sources since it foundation (Colic-Peisker and Farquharson 2011), the language of multiculturalism was introduced in Australia in the 1970s. Multiculturalism cannot be understood only through the official discourse. Instead, it should be analyzed through its different yet interconnected facets: the demographics of diverse people living together; the ideological underpinnings of the multicultural debate; the policies designed to manage cultural diversity; and finally the mishmash of daily social interactions of people with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Everyday multiculturalism offers a critical approach to understanding how people experience, negotiate and respond to cultural diversity in their daily lives (Harris 2009, 2013). By interpreting multiculturalism as a dynamic, lived field of action and interaction, everyday multiculturalism indicates both an empirical space for observation and a specific analytical perspective (Colombo 2010). As an empirical perspective, it focuses attention on mundane, daily situations and ‘micro-territories’ (Harris 2013: 6) where cultural diversity is lived and can be acutely perceived (Wise 2009; Wise and Velayutham 2009). It thus ‘takes an interactional, typically place-situated’ (Wise 2014) orientation to examine how cultural difference is constructed and experienced within particular multicultural contexts.
As an analytical approach, everyday multiculturalism invites us to focus on the ways cultural difference is actively constructed and negotiated; that is, difference is viewed as a practice, an ongoing performance (Colombo 2010). Unstable, multiple and hybrid identifications are a common outcome of such performances of cultural difference (Wise and Velayutham 2009; Harris 2009; Colombo 2010). As Harris (2013: 7) notes, this analytical approach ‘can bring to light micro-projects where production and contestation of cultural difference, mainstream “values” and civic bonds occur through everyday practices’, which can undermine conventional notions of young people needing to be integrated into an already fixed idea of the nation and its values as espoused by top-down, governmental multiculturalism.

Everyday multiculturalism can be observed in an array of urban spaces, such as markets, civic associations, educational or professional institutions, festivals or parks (Wise and Velayutham 2009; Wise 2014). Sport and leisure are a prominent yet under-explored site where multiculturalism is performed. Recent research has examined the social meanings of concrete sport participation, such as multicultural encounters in bodybuilding (Sherman 2009) and everyday anti-racism among street basketball players (Aquino 2015). Sports fandom is one of the main ways that young people engage with high-performance sport, and it is often central to their social and cultural identities (Williams 2007). International research has begun to explore migrants’ cultural identities and (multi)national affiliations through the lens of sports fandom (Burdsey 2006; Fletcher 2011; Tiesler 2012; Tiesler and Bergano 2012; Toffoletti, in press).

Historical and sociocultural research in Australia similarly shows how sport is a site that is of great import to the social experience of certain migrant groups (Hallinan et al. 2007; Mosely et al. 1997). Migrants from Europe who came to Australia after 1945 often experienced sport, and football in particular, as a site that ‘gave them a sense of community, a link with their homeland, and a base for the socialization of their Australian-born offspring’ (Vamplew
Recent research specifically explores sport as a site for social inclusion of people with culturally diverse backgrounds in Australia (e.g. Olliff 2008; Cortis 2009; Author 2013; Maxwell et al. 2013). However, in relation to fandom the scope of these studies has typically been limited to, on the one hand, historical accounts of single ethnically based fan groups (Hay and Guoth 2009) and, on the other hand, media representations of football and multiculturalism (Baker and Rowe 2014). More recently, Rowe (2015) has investigated both Anglo and non-Anglo sports fans in multicultural Australian regions; his preliminary findings, though, discuss these sport fans through the lens of media, identity and national cultural citizenship.

The social relationships and conflicts triggered by multicultural encounters in the sports fandom context can result in the formation of hybrid identities that challenge researchers to grasp ‘the intermediate, in-between, resisting spaces’ (Colombo 2010: 457). These transitional cultural spaces are especially relevant in the face of contemporary concerns about marginalized youth within the increasing culturally diverse urban spaces of Western cities (Harris 2013).

The everyday multiculturalism approach can unveil the multifaceted and often intricate daily encounters of young people who share multicultural spaces. By looking at youth not as troublemakers or passive targets of top-down policies, but as multicultural protagonists and creators of new hybrid cultures, everyday multiculturalism aims to describe the vibrant sociocultural forces that emerge in young people’s everyday life, in order to contest conventional understandings of societies that do not account for the lived experiences of their citizens (Harris 2013). From this perspective, there is a need to better understand the intercultural work of young football fans. As will be shown in this paper, the fluid sociocultural experiences produced in the interstices of daily life on the football terraces cannot be fully accounted for by multicultural discourses that ‘reduce social distinctions to hard-bounded groupings of ethnicity and racial categories’ (Sherman 2009: 175). Everyday multiculturalism thus provides our conceptual framework to analyze RBB football fans.
In considering football fandom as intercultural work, this paper seeks to advance the way in which scholars have been thinking and writing about football fandom. International scholarship has historically interpreted football fandom as a potential site for disorder and ‘uncivilized’ practices (Armstrong and Young 1999). Subsequent research has sought to shift analytical attention to football supporters expressing traditional and consumer-based forms of fandom (e.g. Brown 1998; King 2000; Giulianotti 2002; Crawford 2004; Pearson 2012). While, as noted earlier, this scholarship has included studies of football fandom and social identity, it is yet to fully explore how football fandom features in the way cultural difference is negotiated at, around and beyond the match. In particular, we seek to show that the fandom practices of the RBB articulate a potent form of everyday multiculturalism that challenges the official discourse of multiculturalism. In sum, our analysis moves beyond previous interpretations of football fandom as a potential site for disorder and ‘uncivilized’ practices (Armstrong and Young 1999) to demonstrate how football fandom is a site where different forms of multiculturalism are enacted, challenged and contested.

**Context: Western Sydney and the RBB**

The 2011 Australian census informs us that approximately two million individuals live in Western Sydney in almost 700,000 residences (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). Within more than 50% of these households, people speak a language other than English. Nearly 60% of Western Sydney’s population are first or second generation immigrants from hundreds of countries around the world (Collins et al. 2007). These data place Western Sydney as one of the most culturally diverse areas not only in Australia but worldwide.

The mix of migrants from all over the world has transformed Western Sydney into a super-diverse area (Collins and Poynting 2000). Countless cultural traditions of its ethnic
groups are displayed daily on the streets of Western Sydney, such as different clothes, music, arts and food (Gow 2005). Within these traditions, football has always been a significant element of the cultural experience of various migrant clusters in Western Sydney (Hallinan et al. 2007). As social bias was directed towards the ‘wogs’ (pejorative slang for migrants from Southern Europe), football – labelled ‘wogball’ – also carried over layers of discrimination and stigma during its social history in Australia (Vamplew 1994; Warren 2003; Dabscheck 2007).

The RBB can be described as an active support group with ‘hot’ forms of loyalty characterized by intense identification with and emotional investment in the club (Giulianotti 2002). The group resembles in some respects Pearson’s (2012) description of carnival fans, for whom creating a ‘carnival’ at and around the match appears to be as important as the match itself. This involves a physical and emotional demonstration of support, as well as an engagement with other carnival fans of the club. The RBB create a festive atmosphere across the stadium: they have a band (La Banda) made up by first and second generation migrants from South America and South and Eastern Europe who play trumpets and drums to create a fusion of Latin American and European rhythms based on international football chants and global pop culture. The approximately 2,000 RBB members between the ages of 16 and 49, most of whom live in Western Sydney, stand for the entire game in the Northern part of the Parramatta stadium (known as the ‘active sector’, as opposed to the Southern, Eastern and Western ‘non-active sectors’ where supporters remain seated throughout the match); they sing their own chants which are inspired by football songs around the world – mainly from South America and Europe; they dance ceaselessly while waving their colourful tifos (displays of Italian origin), flags and throwing confetti. A few hours before every match, RBB members and other supporters usually gather in a local pub from where they march in a carnivalesque celebration – with their chants, music and dances – to the stadium. Everyone is welcomed in those parties, which, with their mix of Latin American, Africans, Middle Eastern, Asian and
South and Eastern European bodies, are celebrations of Western Sydney’s cultural diversity (Author 2016).

RBB fans thus perform a particular culture of support, with its own rules, norms and rituals. However, we should not take the carnival analogy too far (Pearson 2012). First, the RBB, like any fan formation, is not a unified group. For example, while it was rare for RBB members to be involved in football-related violence during the fieldwork, on occasions some were involved in provocative behaviours and the display of aggressive masculinity. Second, the invocation of the notion of ‘the carnivalesque’ can be problematic in asserting claims about the everyday practices of football fans. The notion refers to a temporary subversion or reversal of power structures and social hierarchies (Bakhtin 1984). As shown below, RBB fans participate in collective expressions of carnival which contain a challenge to authority. These expressions mostly do not subvert the social hierarchies of everyday life but rather exist in conjunction with the more routinized and habitual aspects of everyday multiculturalism. It is nonetheless critical to acknowledge this ‘driving force’ behind many of the fans’ actions (Pearson 2012: 185).

The RBB have been widely portrayed in the media, often in negative ways. Specifically, they have been represented in newspapers and on television as ‘hooligans’ and ‘troublemakers’. The main topic in this media coverage has been the use of flares, artefacts that are forbidden within Australian stadiums, yet according to football fans are an integral part of global football culture. Whenever RBB fans have thrown a flare, they have attracted considerable negative attention from football governing bodies, police and politicians (Author 2016).

Methods
In this paper, we focus our empirical attention on RBB fans’ interactions and conflicts with the club and police around the 2014 Harmony Day. The events analyzed here are part of a larger ethnographic study that was undertaken during the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 A-League seasons as well as during the 2014 Asian Champions League (ACL) campaign (Author 2015, 2016). Throughout these two years the lead author kept a diary of their attendance to numerous football matches where the researcher joined in the RBB fandom rituals in the stands, as well as in their social practices away from the football stadium, in pubs, streets and everyday life. This method involved watching, observing and talking with fans in order to discover their interpretations, meanings and activities (Brewer 2000).

In addition to focused observations and informal conversations with fans during this fieldwork, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 RBB members. The interviews were conducted at the stadium, in local bars or at the university. The interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded (with the permission of participants) and transcribed verbatim. Moreover, we followed the RBB fans’ online communities and social media activity, and collected secondary data from official club announcements as well as media reports. The field notes and interview transcripts were entered into NVivo and analyzed using ethnographic and thematic analysis techniques. We examined the data to identify issues and themes that recurred, as well as divergent themes. This process was not necessarily sequential; as new themes and sub-themes emerged, the observations were compared and the data were re-examined. Full human ethics approval was obtained from the first author’s University Human Research Ethics Committee.

All these lived experiences helped us to construct a detailed picture of the active support movement in Western Sydney, including its everyday multicultural encounters and fans’ struggles for recognition. The range of data collected provides the empirical basis that we use
to analyze the multicultural encounters and struggles of the 2014 Harmony Day period or, more aptly from the perspective of RBB members, ‘disharmony day’.

(Dis)Harmony in Wanderland

Wanderland is the nickname of Parramatta stadium when the Wanderers play there. Games were always seen as a time for relaxation and enjoyment of the cheerful atmosphere that the RBB usually brought to Wanderland. Since the start of the 2013-2014 A-League season, in October 2013, however, Wanderland had also become a kind of police fortress. It appeared the FFA and the police were uncomfortable with the new fandom culture displayed by the RBB, which they perceived as a threat to the promotion of the A-League as a ‘family-friendly’ environment acceptable to the nation’s mainstream sporting culture. The criminalization of this new culture was quickly felt by the fans, who protested: ‘Loving football is not a CRIME! It feels like I’m in a prison every time I go to a game’ (10 November 2013). As kick-off time approached and the RBB made their traditional march towards the stadium from their pub, a large number of police officers and riot squads were already monitoring their every move: sniffer dogs, horses and a large number of police officers were clearly visible on the streets. Inside the stadium, the active support sector was heavily scrutinized by the presence of not only regular police officers but also riot squads. Fans described their experiences as follows on social media:

Today we saw two undercover cops in the RBB Bay 56. In the most ridiculous oversized jersey to cover his walkie talkie, it was ridiculous. They didn’t sing. They stayed on the concrete. (22 February 2014)
During the season, this police presence was becoming more visible as each game went by, making spectators around the stadium feeling uncomfortable with the intrusive security measures and the body searches that were put in place, including against children and young people. For many fans, football matches that were a ‘local and often mundane experience and practice of diversity and belonging’ (Harris 2013: 139) were fast becoming an unpleasant exercise. A female fan vented her frustrations online:

As a middle aged mother who sits in the Southern/Community end I can say that exactly the same sort of thing happens down our end. My teenage son and his friends have been patted down by security when entering at Southern sector and bully cops have ejected people from that end of the field for trivial matters, such as swearing and blowing a whistle. The excessive policing at our game is making what used to be a fun and exciting experience, uncomfortable and oppressive. It is also taking the attention of all of us away from where it should be, on our team, cheering for them. (24 February 2014)

In a similar vein, a male fan argued:

I’m not saying ‘fuck the police’ but who's organising the amount of police force that needs to be within the RBB is a joke. Their job is to protect. Not to look at people's tickets to see who's sitting in which bays. It's an active bay. No crime in celebrating. Which involves jumping, chanting, dancing. What a disgrace. We are not criminals. I'm just sick of seeing a line of police standing up on the hill before and after the game. (25 February 2014)
It is against this backdrop of already tense relations between fans and authorities that the 2014 Harmony Day should be interpreted. Fans not only complained about being criminalized by police; they also claimed their right to ‘practice [their] civic life in the space of the community’ (Harris 2013: 140). The cultural conflict between RBB fans and police was growing within the RBB fan base. Police were perceived by many fans to represent a top-down, governmental position on how fans should behave in this particular space, which was at odds with how RBB fans sought to express their own mix of cultures, their ways of rejoicing the cultural diversity of their fan group, through their messy celebrations (Hoy 1994). While RBB fans sought to use the football terrace as a space to perform social agency, the police sought to contain this performance.

At this point in time, the Western Sydney Wanderers team was going through an exciting competitive period. In addition to its regular national football season, the team was about to participate in its first international competition in its short history, the 2014 ACL. Fans wanted to be part of this event and celebrate their team’s achievements. However, during the first home game of this competition, played at Parramatta stadium a few days before the 2014 Harmony Day, an incident happened: a few flares were ignited within the RBB sector. Fans have always claimed that flares are part of their football culture; however, these artefacts are prohibited both in Australian stadiums and in the ACL. Police and football authorities such as the Asian Football Confederation and Football Federation Australia (FFA) were fast to respond to the incident, threatening the club with fines and other sanctions. The club quickly turned to the alleged culprits, the RBB members, by releasing a vigorous public statement to announce their zero tolerance policy towards the group as well as the club’s collaboration with police to identify and prosecute the perpetrators. A cultural conflict was made explicit: in an attempt to destroy the group’s core activities, the club’s statement affirmed that all RBB ‘concession items’ such as ‘oversized flags, fence banners, musical instruments, megaphones or loudhailers,
TIFO’s, Capo’s stands and confetti’ were now banned from the stadium (Western Sydney Wanderers, email to members, March 2014). The message was clear: the excluded items concerned the equipment that made up the pleasure of the visual, boisterous and embodied RBB carnival experience (Author 2016). Every cultural artefact that was viscerally connected to the display of the group’s culturally diverse expression of football fandom activities was suppressed. The RBB’s cultural mix was not welcome and would be allowed only on the authorities’ terms.

A few days later, after multiple meetings with all stakeholders involved in the Wanderers match day operations (police, stadium, club, FFA and the RBB), the club retreated from its initial “hard line” position. In a new public statement, it acknowledged that ‘the Wanderland experience created by our fans and the active support led by the Red and Black Bloc (RBB) has become widely regarded as the best sporting experience full of the best sporting fans in the country’ (Western Sydney Wanderers, email to members, March 2014). The club also alleviated some of the restrictions that it had imposed on RBB equipment. These measures, however, were not enough to alleviate the simmering conflict between the fundamentally different ways of celebrating football culture. Once again, what can be seen here is an ideological battle between diverse and often opposed cultural approaches to football fandom.

In the remainder of this paper, we describe and interpret the events that happened in the subsequent weekend, during the A-League Harmony Day round. As will be shown, the celebration of a Harmony Day as part of ‘an ideological project that normalises diversity’ (Colic-Peisker and Farquharson 2011: 581) was in disharmony to the everyday multicultural reality of the RBB.

*Stay still, it’s Harmony Day*

According to the Australian Government Department of Social Services (2016), Harmony Day:
… celebrates Australia’s cultural diversity. It’s about inclusiveness, respect and a sense of belonging for everyone. It is a day for all Australians to embrace cultural diversity and to share what we have in common. The central message for Harmony Day is that ‘everyone belongs’, reinforcing the importance of inclusiveness to all Australians.

Before the flares incident, the club had sent an invitation to all its members encouraging them to celebrate Harmony Day while watching their football club. The message stated:

Harmony Day is extremely important to the Club and the community the Club represents. The event calls for cultural respect for everyone who calls Australia home – from the traditional owners of this land to those who have come from many countries around the world – the same values shared by the Wanderers. (Western Sydney Wanderers, email to members, March 2014)

Hence, on game day the club had its own Harmony Day celebration. On the field there was a parade of the several cultures that inhabit Western Sydney. People from different countries displayed their national flags while wearing their traditional costumes. The different groups also performed their folkloric dances, one after the other. It was a symbolic demonstration of the mainstream multicultural agenda (Colic Peiker and Farquharson 2011), a celebration of culturally diverse groups living together but apart (Wise and Velayutham 2009). There was no real integration between the different groups. It looked more a lifeless exhibition of assorted cultures. No discussion, no questioning, hence no potential multicultural encounters nor disagreements, entirely in line with the normative multicultural agenda guideline that
constructs conflict as problematic (Harris 2013: 140). The few people who were on the stands paying attention to this parade cheered the groups with seemingly little enthusiasm.

Off the field, however, conflict was imminent. As emotions are central to the daily encounters of urban citizens (Wise 2010), the pressure could be felt in every corner of Parramatta city. Prior to the match, RBB members congregated in their pub, where they usually start partying a few hours before the match time. However, on that day there were no festivities inside the pub: RBB leaders were engaged in tense conversations with police command; then, the group cancelled its march towards the stadium and asked for their band musicians to take their instruments away.

Inside the stadium, replacing the usual noise of the RBB carnivalesque atmosphere was a defeating silence: no flags, music or dancing. For the first time in the history of Wanderland, it was possible to hear the conversations between coaches and players. RBB members were staging a silent protest. They were present at the match but watched it silently and seated. To the astonishment of other supporters, media and visitors who attended the match to experience the performances of those young people on the stands, the stadium was flat. Leading football commentator Les Murray (2014) wrote in his post-match column:

I was at a football match that felt more like a funeral the other day. Parramatta had not been this quiet since before the Wanderers began to gestate not that long ago. The Red and Black Bloc, the RBB, to whose rhythmic sound the city of Parramatta had been pulsating for almost two years now, was having a silent protest.

The silent protest Murray describes further indicates the conflict between different cultural approaches to fandom: the RBB sought to reclaim their right to express their fandom in ways that were unacceptable to, and hence repressed by, the police.
At the same time, the heavy police presence repeated itself. Body searches were conducted and sniffer dogs were aggressive towards RBB members. Police officers looked amused as the fans were silently seated. They appeared to be entertained by the protest and the power they had on their hands, blocking young people to walk around or just leave the area to go elsewhere. Moreover, police officers looked cheerful as they could eliminate the noisy ‘trouble’ that comes with the RBB celebrations. As one fan reflected:

RBB member kicked out for "moshing" and someone copped a 6 month ban for sitting in the wrong bay as well as minors getting patted down!! I'm getting sick of the way we are being treated by the authority and the club is doing nothing to defend us!! Getting sick of this! I'll support the wanderers forever but this needs to change!!

(23 March 2014)

Around the stadium the oppressive atmosphere was similar. While a few non-active fans tried to unsuccessfully emulate the RBB chants, the majority was not only quiet, but also feeling the outcomes of the police repression in every sector. Afterwards, a member wrote a letter to the club; after proclaiming his love for the club and for the match day atmosphere, he stated that he and his family, despite enjoying the RBB noise and movement, preferred to buy the most expensive membership in a non-active area ‘to secure a seat in a “calmer” area of the stadium’. Then, after describing how police dispensed aggressive treatment towards his family and friends in that area, he raised a few dot points:

My family and friends are NOT criminals; there has NEVER been an incident at Wanderers games nearby our sector; police presence in our sector is blatant overkill of
resources; aggressive police activity is simply provocative; I will NOT be treated like a criminal.

These snapshots and testimonies indicate that this community of fans experienced perceived criminalization of their cultural practices. Their creative and unpredictable ways of displaying their cultural diversity posed a threat to the mainstream idealised ‘fantasy of cohesion and unity’ (Harris 2013: 141) – the family-friendly atmosphere that the FFA aimed to impose within the A-League in order to make their product more tolerable to the stakeholders of the nation’s mainstream sporting culture. In the next section, we examine more closely the meanings and implications of these two contrasting ways of dealing with multiculturalism.

**Everyday multiculturalism in the football stands**

Recent years have seen the spread of political discourses around the importance of youth for the future of cultural diversity in multicultural regions and countries (Harris 2013). These governmental representations, however, promote the ideal that young people in multicultural cities could be shaped by the social cohesion agenda without real encounters; an idea of conviviality without conflict. In such discourses, young people ‘are rarely seen as civic actors, creative agents or multicultural citizens in their own right’ (Harris 2013: 5), and their everyday experience of how to relate to others is undermined. They are practically invisible, unless a disruption of the social order happens, to remind society that a new generation wants to be listened to. However, research on the everyday lives of multicultural youth shows that the most adjusted are those who manage a social life of cultural hybridity (Harris 2014); the ones who learn how to live in often ‘dynamic and unpredictable kinds of productive relationality in their place’ (Harris 2013: 6).
The events described above juxtapolse two ways of living multiculturalism and promoting conviviality within a multicultural community. The first one, represented here by the club’s official Harmony Day celebrations, envisages cultural diversity as a static situation, where culturally diverse people are allowed to come along and display their own traditions but within the constraints of a hegemonic power that controls what can be said and seen. Within this mainstream multicultural strategy, the actual everydayness of the embodied multicultural encounters that regularly happen during daily life is suppressed in the name of an imagined peacefully conviviality (Wise 2010). Moreover, conflict is minimized under the pledge of social cohesion (Harris 2013). By performing a predesigned itinerary, these groups, whilst coming from a range of various cultural backgrounds, were in fact representing ‘civilized ideals of white hegemony’ (Aquino 2015: 171).

By contrast, there was the dynamism of the joyful atmosphere created by the RBB, a cohort of multicultural young people who wanted to publicly express their football culture; a culture that can be neither confined to nor controlled by the neoliberal powers that own the game (Numerato 2015). A culture that is ‘experienced on the ground as a lived practice of embodied and felt encounter, where difference is both constructed and contested’ (Harris 2009: 191). Within the group the cultural mix of European, South-Americans, Africans and Asians produced new forms of sociability, and it also allowed these young people to considerably reshape their everyday interactions. As one RBB member mentioned in an interview:

I barely had South American friends before the Wanderers, now some of my best mates that, you know, that are really important to me are South Americans. I was also a cultural person but exposed to many others, its new experience I guess, eating Uruguayan *churrasco*, Ecuadorian soup banana and meat and oat [Laughs].
Hence, like the bodybuilders studied by Sherman (2009), who considered their gym as a space where they could regain social agency, the everyday experience of young people in the RBB may ‘represent something of an oasis in which members are able to subvert, elide, refigure and otherwise tamper with the constraints’ (Sherman 2009: 174) of the cultural controls that the hegemonic powers want to inflict on them. Paradoxically, the silent protest staged by the RBB on that particular Harmony Day was clearly heard as a cry for freedom and, most of all, for respect for their cultural hybridity.

Respect is essentially what helps to keep everyday multiculturalism alive; culturally diverse young people want neither to impose nor to lose their difference (Colombo 2010). Rather, they seek to create social spaces where they can be included, recognized and above all respected (Colombo 2010). Under the circumstances that surrounded the Harmony Day, the space provided by their football fandom practices to demonstrate their cultural differences remains ambivalent: as police act ferociously towards them and media portray fans as criminals, this space can constrain their struggle for inclusion and respect; but simultaneously can be seen as ‘a potential resource for action’ (Colombo 2010: 460).

The fans’ growing consciousness of the association between criminalization and their perceived cultural difference – which is largely expressed in their multicultural celebrations in the football stands – can be perceived in the online comments that followed the Harmony Day:

Our atmosphere and the festive trend of our community is being systematically removed! We are not Animals, we are not criminals! We are decent people who come from all walks of life, from different cultures and economic circumstances! We represent the modern Australia! We define what is called an egalitarian society! (25 March 2014)
All these [sic] police bullshit makes you wonder if multiculturalism has really worked in this country. (25 March 2014)

We need to teach these security forces a lesson or two about the battlers! The battlers from Western Sydney! The tradies, teachers, nurses, office workers etc. Our club is built on our ethnic diversity, camaraderie and hardworking values. This is what our team and area is about… (30 March 2014)

By using terms such as ‘ethnic diversity’ and ‘multiculturalism’, RBB members demonstrate an awareness of the governmental ideal of a positive and united multicultural community. On the other hand, it becomes clear that what they have been producing in the football stands ‘cannot be fixed in “Australian values” or any other kind of homogenising consensus-driven set of demands’ (Harris 2013: 144). Their expressions of cultural difference have helped them to build a culture of support that will not compulsorily be integrated into a mainstream ‘harmonic’ community. Their fandom practices can be seen as a counterpoint to forced integration; they do not want to be acknowledged only in a ‘festive’ Harmony Day, but mainly be respected for what they construct in the messiness of their everyday cultural activities (Sherman 2009). Football fandom appears to be one of the most important activities for these young people to learn how to construct a respectful social space that brings all these differences together and creates transient solidarities and a sense of social agency.

**Discussion and conclusion: who will take (cultural) control of the stands?**

Created to play in the top tier of Australian professional football (the A-League), the Wanderers quickly achieved significant success on the field, winning the Minor Premiership in its first
season in the A-League (2012/13) and lifting the 2014 ACL trophy, becoming the first Australian club to win these international honours. The inception of this club also opened the door for a flow of cultural energy that was hidden in Western Sydney. Led by the vocal RBB, the Wanderers fans had started to show to their country’s innovative ways of performing their sports fandom. Their original demonstrations, embedded in the diverse cultures that inhabit Western Sydney and that have football as one of their main cultural expressions, have found in this team a much-needed channel to express their multiple and hybrid cultural identities. Rather than passively adhering to prescribed cultural roles that represent neither their daily lives nor their heritage, the RBB has created new cultural forms which, as discussed in this paper, are an outcome of the various ways in which Western Sydney youth relate to football. These expressions, though, have something in common: they are connected to the powerful global cultural flows of football and pop culture. In addition, their cultural demonstrations mimic the actual daily lives of residents: they are embodied performances where bodies dance, transpire and touch each other, while their passions transpire in the air.

Our findings show, however, that these unruly bodies have not been easily accepted by authorities which consistently proclaim that these new and diverse bodies do not belong in the Australian sports realm. This division between bodies that belong and bodies that do not belong (Sherman 2009) became highly visible during the 2014 Harmony day celebrations. What should have been a festivity to celebrate the region’s cultural diversity was experienced by fans as a display of forced cultural integration. If any sort of multiculturalism was celebrated there, it was the top-down, governmental multiculturalism that embraces cultural diversity as much as it does not disrupt hegemonic cultural powers (Hage 1998; Harris 2009). The fans’ performance of cultural difference on Harmony Day was permitted only insofar as it complied with the rules of governmental multiculturalism. However, everyday cultural difference was claiming its right not only as a caged expression, but as a powerful and lived force. The RBB
with their carnivalesque festivity that produces noise and demands their members to be constantly active questioned the peaceful social conviviality proposed by the formal Harmony Day. Moreover, RBB celebrations were showing that, as cultural difference is constructed in an everyday basis, it needs different tools to be analyzed.

The use of everyday multiculturalism as an analytical lens has allowed us to critically examine how multiculturalism is enacted in an important site where young people can exert their civic life and simultaneously hybridize their culture: the football stands. By comparing previous works that have unveiled essential insights into young people living in cultural diversity with the Western Sydney youth who perform and claim their difference in and beyond the football stands, we were able to highlight how multiculturalism needs to be understood not only with regard to the normative policies associated with top-down, governmental multiculturalism, but rather in the daily lives and mundane practices of people living in culturally diverse settings.

At the outset of this paper, we showed how ever since the creation of the Wanderers the media has been highlighting the multicultural profile of the club’s fans. The diverse football cultures expressed by these fans are frequently used in television advertisements by the FFA and the club in order to promote and commercialize the game. However, as in the Harmony Day, the use of “multiculturalism” in all these instances is top-down and overlooks the intricate everyday practices of football fandom in which these culturally diverse football fans partake and the meanings they attach to these practices. Our analysis provides further evidence for the need of a closer look into how multiculturalism is constructed and performed within everyday practices in culturally diverse spaces. It reveals how a seemingly trivial leisure activity such as football fandom can act as, or transform into, a space for resistance and for the production and negotiation of new, bottom-up forms of cultural hybridization. Our paper thus suggests that across the fabric of professional football in Australia multiculturalism is lived in conflicting
ways. This signals a key challenge for the game and its fans into the future: as professional football continues to grow in Australia, will fans be able to keep their multiple and hybrid cultural performances and contestations on display in the football stands? Or will these spaces be increasingly closed down through compliance with the hegemonic rules of a commodified football league?

Notes

1. The Asian Champions League (ACL) is the region’s equivalent of the European Champions League.
2. In order to protect the identity of the individuals who have posted these comments, in this paper we only provide the dates of any posts cited, but not the names of the social media platforms where the comments were posted.

References


of Australian migration. Canberra: History Program and Centre for Immigration and Multicultural Studies, Australian National University, 39–61.


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