



Watching Women Watch Sports and (re)Claim Their Fandom in Popular Culture

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Abstract

This conceptual paper explores the gendered framing of women as sports fans in literature and pop culture and the surveillance of their fandom in the stands. By investigating what it feels like to be watched while watching, and the complex ways in which gendered practices complicate the position of women as spectators of sport, we can see how some women are actively challenging the stereotypes of sports fandom in popular culture. Through using the method of reflexive autoethnography, (see Delamont, 2009; Ellis et al., 2010 and Holman Jones, 2016) this paper will re/address how women are framed as fans in the sports fan space and the activism they demonstrate in these presentations that has gone unnoticed and under-researched in the sports fan space.

Through autoethnography I intend to also add personal reflections to connect to, challenge and re-position some representations of women as sports fans through this framework in order to explore different ways of engaging with the existing research. This method builds on innovative approaches to exploring fandom through mixed method and ethnographical investigations that have been developed in studies by key researchers in the field such as Hoeber & Kerwin's (2013), McParland (2012) and Richards (2015 &, 2018).

Applying the lens of reflexive autoethnography as the primary methodology will further allow me, an engaged participant myself, to re-explore my previous experiences to give gendered perceptions of sports fandom further nuanced consideration. This approach aims to offer alternative ways to consider how women show activism in challenging their surveillance and presenting their multi-layered and complicated experiences of fandom by re-viewing how women as fans are represented in popular culture.

This paper will move through an examination of the existing research on gender and sports fandom, and touch on concepts of surveillance and present examples of women as fans in several text that perform elements of activism to challenge the 'female fan' stereotype to connect key ideas to the reflective autoethnographical

entries, bringing a different way to understand the gendered experience of being watched while watching sport in a stadium.

Keywords Women Fans · Fan activism · Surveillance · Gender Performance · Sport Literature

1 Introduction

This paper looks at looking. What it feels like to be watched, to watch and the complex ways in which gendered practices complicate the position of women as spectators of sport as they claim space in the stadium through what I argue are small acts of fan activism. Fan activism can be described as a collective effort by fans to bring about change and we see examples of fan collectives using their voice and power as stakeholders in sport to drive political agendas, challenge unfavourable decisions of sports governing bodies, and/or protest the treatment of individual athletes or poor behaviour by individual athletes. Cleland et al. looking at fan activism and collective action through the relational sociology of football fans highlight that activism through a lens of a sports fan, in their case football, is distinctive through the grounding connection of the sport, and the site of the that connection, the stadium.

More pertinent to understandings of collective action by football fans is that these political mobilizations are around a form of consumption: football. This is distinct from earlier forms of social movement that were centred on gaining political rights on the basis of class, race, sexuality, or gender. (Cleland et al., 2018, pg.16).

However this article will explore an element of activism that is not often considered or reflected upon when it comes to sport, particularly in work that explores the experiences of women who are fans of elite men's sports and the social surveillance they experience. By considering work on gendered surveillance in the hypermasculine and hegemonic spaces of sporting stadiums alongside autoethnographical reflections and readings of how that experience is portrayed in popular culture, I aim to re-view the actions of women fans in film and literature to amplify their activism. This is an important consideration as we move to make sport and leisure more inclusive and intersectional but to so that, we must also consider the wider portrayals of fans and peripheral roles in sporting culture. When viewed through a feminist lens, fan activism can be seen as a way for marginalised groups, particularly women and gender diverse people, to challenge the dominant narratives and power structures in media and entertainment (see Drücke and Zobl, 2012). In this case, the media and entertainment of sport and sports stories. By viewing women in sport pop culture through this lens, this paper seeks to challenge the objectification and hyper-sexualisation of women in the popular culture products of sport, as well as call attention to the lack of varied representation and diversity of fans in sport narratives.

Examining social surveillance is an under-explored area when it comes to self-surveillance and the surveillance of perceived or prescribed gendered behaviours within

sports fan culture. Thus, this article explores what it feels like to be watched while watching through the method of reflexive autoethnography and reflection on portrayals of sport fandom in popular culture. By participating in a re-viewing, re-reading and providing my own reflections through autoethnography, I aim to reveal some of the hidden, misunderstood or, more often than not, gendered misinterpretations of acts of activism that women as fans perform to challenge gender stereotypes in sporting narratives. Through analysing the presentation of some women fans in films and literature through the lens of gendered social surveillance, I aim to reposition the way the women characters have been written and portrayed to amplify their acts of activism that seek to claim their space as fans in the stands.

1.1 Gender Gazing

Firstly, I want to explore this concept by analysing the spatial dynamics of sporting events for those watching in the crowd. When sitting in the sports stadium, the gaze of fans is assumed to be towards the field of play. 'Real fans' of whatever sport is being played would not deviate from watching the action, or so it is assumed. Yet many women can act as if their behaviour is being watched while they themselves watch the game. As if, in other words, they are under surveillance in a Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1979). At issue is the hyper-masculine space of most spectator sports arenas, and the questions – and quest – for authenticity which women fans continue to wrestle with (see Jones, 2008; Mewett & Toffoletti, 2011; Pope, 2012; Merrill et al, 2015).

How then sports stadiums enable a male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) to operate in a space where women are not positioned to be gazed at, but are still pressured to police their own behaviour, is an unexplored and complicated fan experience. The complication lies in how women can comply in a self-surveillance of their own identities in this space (Foucault, 1979) to feel a sense of belonging, and also exist in a tension of claiming space and challenging the surveillance they fall under. The navigation between these ideas while understanding that complicity within the male hegemony in the stadium is explored in foundational sociological work of women fans which highlights these experiences as quite universal for women fans of a variety of sporting codes (see Mewett & Toffoletti, 2011; Pope, 2012; Richards, 2015). This gender gazing within a sporting environment that features men's sports is a tension that contradicts yet complements the concepts of surveillance and gender theory for women as spectators. We can see how the drive to belong can enable complicity, yet there are sometimes subtle behaviours of some women fans that can be interpreted as challenging, re-positioning and claiming space in the stadium. However, these experiences have not translated to representation in the wider popular culture of sport such as film, memoir and literature to make the complex lived experiences of women fans visible. This perpetuates gender stereotypes and heteronormative narratives of women fans as well as limits portrayals of broader intersectional representation in the fan space.

This paper will move through an examination of the existing research on women's sports fandom and reference germinal sociological research such as Foucault, Butler and Mulvey to connect key ideas and situate the knowledge. This paper does not seek

to provide a thorough dissection of these key theoretical frameworks, but uses them to illustrate connections to examples in sports fan pop culture and wider research on sports fandom as well as draw inspiration for the autoethnographical reflective writing and re-viewing of popular culture texts as research practice. Included in this article is also a personal and reflective autoethnographical entry that is separated and italicized in the text. This is situated alongside examples from popular culture such as scenes from films, passages from books and journalism that when connected, bring a new lens to understand the experience of being watched while watching sport in a stadium, and a re-viewing of the portrayals of watching women in a sports fan culture setting to (re)position the audience to view their agency and activism.

1.2 Social Surveillance in the Sporting Stadium

How social surveillance occurs in multiple gendered ways for women who attend live sports events gives us insights into how women are perceived in the sporting area. It also highlights the complicated history women fans have endured, and are also complicit in, in the quest for fan authenticity that is seemingly never in question for many men (see Giulianotti, 1999, Jones, 2008; Klugman, 2012; Dixon, 2015). Moreover, it raises questions of how the quest for belonging functions in hyper masculine spaces such as sporting arenas. Butler's work on gender performance (1990) helps us see how historical, socially constructed elements of gender contribute to the concept of becoming or building an identity or identities.

As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations' (Butler, 1990, p. 10).

If we place this within the historical context of Australian Rules football as an example of a long-running sporting league created by and for men, where, from the game's inception in Melbourne in 1858, it was 'evident that the hierarchies within these [football] clubs were the natural expression of the status and power distinctions within the community' (Hess, 2000, p. 6), we can see how historical and societal gendered assumptions of women are placed into the sports arena both then and now (see also Hess, 1996).

When attending live sports, we often assume the performances of the participants in the culture are organic displays of passion. Fans cheering and (often literally) showing their true colours. The behaviours on display appear to be natural and uninhibited. However, we know from historical social and performance theory (Goffman, 1959; & Butler, 1990), that public presentation of self/selves can be anything but natural, particularly when it can be socially moderated and gendered. Goffman (1959) used the concept of theatre and performance to develop the analogy of the 'front stage' to describe social exchanges that occurs in front of others and/or for the benefit of particular public settings. What Goffman then details as 'back stage' performances are those behaviours that occur when we are alone or in a more private social setting, and posits the question, which performances are our 'true' selves? (Goffman, 1959). What interests me from this notion of performance of self are the

complications constructions of gender add and also how gendered spaces are perpetuated and regulated over time socially and reflected back at us through popular culture such as sporting films, memoir and literature.

The concept of how people perform in social spaces and modify their behaviour to suit perceived social norms is not new. Social surveillance, specifically the research on surveillance and behaviour is most famously discussed in the seminal text on this subject, Foucault's, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1979). Foucault used Jeremy Bentham's panoptic prison structure to explain how the policing of prisoners from a centrally located tower in which a guard can see the prisoners at all times without being seen themselves created an environment where self-policing by the prisoners took effect. The fear that they might be being watched by a guard they could not see was enough to influence their behaviour. Foucault investigated how this concept extends outside the prison and into society in the ways people police themselves in certain ways when under the threat of being watched, casting an inward eye.

Of course it is not just enforcement of correct behaviour through a law-abiding sense that Foucault looks at from this model taken from the panopticon, it is also that of the social. Yet while the notion of the panopticon and surveillance has been extended to some sports studies, few scholars have incorporated it into an approach that also engages with questions of gender and the method of autoethnography.

A pillar of this practice is in the work of, Jennifer Ann McMahon and Dawn Penney (2013) who used interviews with elite swimmers as well as autoethnographical accounts from one of the author's (McMahon) who was also an elite swimmer, to study how the pressures swimmers faced to maintain specific weights while competing became normalised. 'In Foucauldian terms, normalisation refers to social processes through which ideas and actions come to be seen as normal' (McMahon & Penney, 2013, p. 159). The constant weigh-ins administered by team doctors and coaches had a panoptic effect on athletes. The relentless external monitoring along with the fear of not making weight became something that was monitored internally by the swimmers. This act of self-monitoring became a normalised yet traumatising experience for these athletes as they became motivated by fear. As McMahon and Penney note:

An important feature of *panopticism* is "the total visibility of bodies, of individuals and things under a system of centralised surveillance" (Foucault, 1997, p. 226). Lyon (2001) used the concept of panopticism and applied it in the contemporary sense, saying that the panoptic gaze does not need to surround a physical structure of an institution but "permeates the spaces of everyday life" (Scott, 2010, p. 220).' (McMahon & Penney, 2013, pp. 159).

For the swimmers themselves, 'The external application of surveillance eventually becomes unnecessary as the swimmers [prisoners] inscribe in themselves the power relation such that they simultaneously play both roles, they become the principle of their own subjection (Foucault, 1979)' (McMahon & Penney, 2013, pp. 160).

This research is interesting to me as someone drawn to research on surveillance in sport and the use of autoethnography as a methodology. While McMahon and Penney focused on the experiences of elite swimmers, not women sports fans, their research

highlights the ways in which monitoring can ‘permeate the spaces of everyday life’ (Scott, 2010, p. 220). I want to build on this observation to examine the way the monitoring in sports stadium occurs in gendered ways. This monitoring does not come from one single central point of surveillance, but through the permeating of the everyday experience of the active male gaze and the extension of this through a duality where women are watched while watching.

2 Panopticons and the Presence of Women

During my personal experience as an Australian Rules football fan, there have been countless times when I have felt under surveillance and then reminded of what my perceived place might be in the promoted homogenous culture of sport fandom. That maybe I am not perceived as an ‘authentic’ fan. That my fan-self is potentially questioned by others. I have walked in through the turnstiles of the biggest stadium in Australia – the Melbourne Cricket Ground – wide eyed, excited and happy, going about my fan-ness like it was no one else’s business and feeling like I belong until something wakes me up. From these experiences, a subconscious desire for my participation not to be ‘seen’ in a gendered way has developed into fear to not be awakened or expelled from the place I love. This fear has then driven me to subconsciously devise strategies and performances that are traditionally more accepted in spaces with a historically dominant male social group.

If we go back to Bentham’s panoptic prison (see Miller, 1987) and bring it into the social space, the tower can be represented by the concept of dominant groups who have more social currency, thereby somewhat masking explicitly where the gaze of surveillance is coming from. We never know if it is indeed falling on us, which then brings a constant inward self-surveillance, out of fear of not being perceived as belonging to the crowd. In the context of a sporting arena, the theory relating to performance of self, surveillance and self-surveillance in gendered ways, is seldom explored as the watching or role of the watchers is complicated. I posit that not only do people watching the game at a sport stadium internalise the panoptic gaze, but that they then shine it on the others around them, questioning who belongs in the sports fan space in direct relation to their own sense of belonging, or perhaps more importantly, not belonging. This social surveillance is bound in the ‘group mentality’ culture that is attributed to sports fans and the pressure that places on marginalised groups to comply to belong and participate in sports fandom. Though we know that fans are indeed not a homogenous group. Indeed, highlighting the importance of using sports fandom as a site for sociological research, Cleland et al. demonstrate the richness of diversity that football (soccer) fandom can offer to understand many lived experiences through the intersection with fandom of the sport.

Football fandom is an excellent way of assessing the networks of interactions. Football fans are heterogeneous and come from a wide range of backgrounds and interests. They share a love of the game and their clubs, and as we shall see, this is increasingly becoming an area of political mobilization. The social worlds of football comprise a diverse network of players, coaches, owners,

fans, administrators, journalists, and more that have a variety of interests in the sport. In this way we can start to see how fans interact and intersect across groups. (Cleland et al., 2018, pg. 2)

Yet, when we think of sports fandom, for most, this description is not the one that comes to mind as we continue to place a homogenous, majority white and cis/het male as the default sports fan.

Modern sports stadiums tend to be like the Ancient Roman 'Circus'. Whether circular or rectangular in nature, everyone in the stands is looking inwards and watching the action. If we try to compare them to the panopticon, there is of course one key element missing. The central surveillance tower. Instead, there is a field of play in the centre of the space. Without a tower and a central point of surveillance, as well as the added focal point of the game, which participants in this environment are 'watching', what or who normalises the behaviour of the participants? Who holds the power? Who watches the watchers? In the instance of moderating gendered performances and behaviour, it is the male gaze.

Laura Mulvey developed the notion of the 'male gaze' in her seminal text, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). More specifically, Mulvey explored the male gaze through the study of film where the positioning of female characters on screen is framed by their sexualisation and objectification, catering exclusively for the 'visual pleasure' of a heterosexual, male audience. She notes that:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey, 1975, p. 19).

Mewett and Toffoletti have applied the concept of Mulvey's male gaze in their research on women fans, with a perspective on the role of women as watchers. They state that, 'while feminist film criticism reveals the social power historically accorded to the male gaze, it also illuminates the role women play as spectators' (Mewett & Toffoletti, 2012, p. 100). The 'gaze' of women spectators at elite male sports is acknowledged in popular culture, but in a largely dismissive form through jokes that these women only attend sport in order to 'perve' at the bodies of the male players in some form of 'reverse' sexual objectification (see Wedgwood, 2008; Klugman, 2012; Richards, 2015; Curtin, 2015).

Indeed, the historical research of Hess has shown that not only were there ardent, passionate and knowledgeable women as fans of Australian Rules football from the game's inception, but that women made up a significant portion of the early football crowds (Hess, 2000, p. 121). Yet while there is evidence that large numbers of women have always attended Australian Rules football matches, there is also evidence that these women have often been maligned. Despite their knowledge and passion for the game, when women became too passionate or perhaps were not performing their prescribed gender in the correct social ways, their passion was perceived as unruly

and inappropriately aggressive. Hess quotes an article from the *Argus* in his research that describes an account of some women at a game played in Melbourne in 1896 where the women spat on opposition players or tried to stab them with their hat pins, screaming ‘kill him’ towards the umpire (Hess, 2000, p. 122). Hess thus states that,

female spectators were seen in some quarters as having a deleterious effect on the tone of football matches. They took their barracking too seriously, and were, as a consequence, blamed for at least some of the social ills surrounding the game in Melbourne (Hess, 2000, p. 122).

While Klugman’s analysis of the historical representations of women Australian Rules fans in late 1800s and early 1900s revealed examples where women’s passion for the game was not always seen as interpreted as ‘unruly’, the male journalists still intimated that these women were out of place (Klugman, 2016). Klugman notes that the male journalists ‘seemed at once amazed and disconcerted by the way these women invaded male spaces and expressed no shame in vigorously adding to the cacophony of sounds at football games’ (Klugman, 2016, p. 2098).

2.1 Something to Call My Own

Applying the lens of autoethnography as methodology to examine some of these notions allows me, an engaged participant and self-identified woman and sports fan, to explore my lived experiences in the stadium where surveillance has impacted the performance of fan identity. Autoethnography allows the researcher’s narrative to be ‘written in’ to the research process (Chang, 2008). Meredith Nash notes that:

Benefits of autoethnography include the rejection of the ‘traditional’ position of researchers as uninvolved observers in qualitative research and the possibility of inspiring others to reflect critically upon their own embodied experiences (Sparkes, 2000). Autoethnography also offers an embodied understanding of gendered performances (Nash, 2015, p.4).

My use of autoethnography in this work is inspired by researchers working in literary studies, sports sociology, and the cultural studies of sport (Delamont, 2009; Ellis et al., 2010; Holman Jones, 2016). It also builds on innovative approaches to exploring fandom through mixed method and ethnographical investigations that have been developed by key studies such as Hoeber & Kerwin’s work on collaborative self-ethnography to explore the experiences of female sports fans (2013), McParland’s approach to using autoethnography in ‘Forging a New Direction in Feminist Sport History’ (2012) and Richards’ ethnographic field work in football fandom in the UK as a self-identifying female football fan herself (2018) that have also served me in my own previous research in which autoethnography and practice-led creative writing have helped me address issues of positionality, reflect on personal experiences and breakdown ingrained gender biases (see Symons 2017, 2019 & 2023).

I walk down the aisle and find a seat a few rows from the fence. This is not great viewing at the Docklands Stadium, you can’t see all the way across the ground so

when the play is in the opposite pocket, you have to watch it on the big screen, but I don't care. There is no one around these seats and I can have the row to myself – all while being close to the action when the play is on my side of the ground. It is a St Kilda home game, they are taking on my West Coast Eagles and I haven't seen them play live in a long time. I'm so excited to watch them. I feel completely alone but not lonely. I feel like my team is about to play just for me. There is much to be said about being at a sold-out blockbuster at the MCG. The sound of the crowd is exhilarating. But I love the quiet at West Coast Eagles games in Melbourne. The intimacy of it. Sometimes I wonder if that is why I chose them as my team. I wanted something that I could call my own. Something that I didn't have to share. I am relaxed. I am happy. I am at the football watching my team.

Two male Saints supporters sit directly behind me and I straighten up in my seat. I am immediately angry. There are so many seats around us in this empty stadium that have been left open for general admission, why have they sat right behind me? I can feel them on my skin. I feel itchy. I try to ignore them.

I tune out their innate St. Kilda dribble about how awful their team is. I don't disagree. The Eagles begin to kick away and I clap every goal with a 'Go Eagles' cheer. I love cheering at the game. I seldom get to do it. It is a release and in these games with few in attendance, I know that they can hear me. They can hear my support and I feel like I am contributing, I am a part of this. After a few goals, I hear the men mocking me. They clap slowly and thunderously in my ears behind me, mimicking my cheers sarcastically.

It kills me. It silences me. I feel exposed and ashamed. I feel I have caused shame. Have I embarrassed my team by clapping or cheering them in an embarrassing way? Am I distracting the players? Are the players also rolling their eyes at me wanting me to shut up, to leave?

Why don't I roll my eyes back at the men who have sat directly behind me in a stadium with a capacity of 50,000 at a game with an attendance of approximately 20,000? They chose to sit directly behind a singular Eagles fan in an empty bay of seats. Why don't they move if I am such a bother to them?

I sit on edge with them behind me. I don't want to move because I don't want them to think that I'm not tough enough to handle their mockery. I don't even go to the bathroom at half-time because I don't want them to think I have caved and left. But I also want to remain still, silent, invisible. I want them not to see me. I feel sick with a cavalcade of confusing and conflicting feelings.

It's now the third-quarter and I notice my lips are irritating me. Dry from the dehydration of not wanting to drink anything to avoid having to go to the bathroom and also from the winter chill. I have paw-paw lip balm in my bag. I go to reach for it and immediately stop myself on two accounts. Firstly, I don't want the men behind me to see that I have brought a designer handbag to the game. Secondly, the action of applying the balm to my lips is something I can't bear for them to see me do. I don't want them to see me taking my attention away from the action to do something 'girly'. A real fan wouldn't do that. A real fan should be so focussed on the game that they shouldn't be distracted by such trivial things as applying lip balm.

I hear them go to the bar several times to get beers during the quarters and I never question their loyalty to their team. Why do I think they are questioning mine? Why

do I think they even care if I put some lip balm on? Why do I feel their eyes on me when I know they are watching the game?

They leave halfway through the final quarter; they have given up as my Eagles continue to school their Saints. I relax. I cross my legs and lean back. West Coast are going to win. I can finally enjoy the game.

And I can apply some lip balm.

2.2 Guys Love Girls Who Love Sports

Looking at women as sports fans in a modern context through popular culture offers an interesting contrast to historical representations of women in the surroundings of a sports stadium and can add a more detailed understanding to the perceptions of women in sport that we still hold as a society—if we take the time to really look at them. While it might be considered more socially appropriate for women to attend and cheer at sporting matches in contemporary times compared to Melbourne in the 1890's, women are still watched and monitored and considered outsiders or novelties while they watch the action. Essentially, they are still considered 'invaders' (Klugman, 2016). However re-viewing some portrayals of women being watched in the stadium from modern sports popular culture gives us a chance to re-cast their portrayals as invaders, new and not-knowledgeable fans and sexualised novelties as acts of fan activism by acknowledging the space they claim for themselves. By re-viewing their actions and casting a more critical eye on the gaze they are falling under, we can provide a more nuanced reading of women's activism in the stands as they navigate and perform gender and fandom under a male gaze while maintaining an authenticity that means something to them.

The first example I want to investigate here is in the 2018 Netflix film *Set It Up*. In this scene two assistants who are conspiring to get their difficult bosses to fall in love are at Yankee Stadium in an attempt to get their bosses to kiss on kisscam. While they wait, they are watching the game in the stands. Harper (played by Zoey Deutch) is a big Yankees fan. She is happy sitting in her favourite viewing spot in the stadium where she knows the people in the seats around her from years of attending ballgames. She is wearing her Yankees gear with pride and is heavily invested in the game. As she cheers and yells out to encourage her team, Charlie (played by Glen Powell) watches her. He takes out his phone and takes a photo of her.

I'm going to take a picture of you and post it on *Tinder* because guys love girls who love sports.

Are you kidding me?

They do.

Guys think that they like girls who like sports but what they actually like is a girl in a very tight sports jersey serving them wings and getting the terminology wrong. Guys like girls who like sports who like sports.

This exchange is brief before the characters become re-focused on their goal to romantically connect their bosses to make their work lives easier, but it points to a mostly unexamined gendered sports fan experience.

Through her response, we see that Harper is aware of how men perceive her, and other women's fandom. She understands the misunderstanding of the desire some heterosexual men might have to meet a woman who shares their passion for sports. But while knowing this, she also has a confidence in her fandom, and she does have a genuine love for her sport and for her team. She feels comfortable in the stadium surrounded by friendly fans and shows genuine happiness occupying space there. But the moment Charlie takes her picture pulls her out of that comfort and identifies her as other. Charlie sees her in this space as not a genuine sports fan enjoying herself at the stadium watching her team, but interprets her *fan-ness* as a novelty and something that can be sexualized and indeed, in a misguided way, where he feels he is also helping her by capturing an image she can use to attract men on a dating app. Thus, the audience can read Charlie's actions as jovial, collegial and fun—not sexist or sexualised.

This scene is fleeting and Harper's insightful and astute response is not explored further in the film. This is disappointing considering Harper herself is an ambitious sportswriter and her boss is a woman who has created a sports media empire. Further conversation about both character's position in the world of sports media through the prism of their own fandom, and as women working in the industry would have been a complementary addition to the commentary of women in sport in popular culture.

This scene, as well as the historical commentary of how actively engaged women can be while watching sport, highlights the ways in which women can both feel like they intrinsically belong at the stadium and in the fan culture as well as feel excluded and sometimes expelled from it. It also shows how women can both be aware and unaware of the gaze that falls on them while they are watching the action and actively sit in the tension.

Arguably, Harper challenging Charlie, albeit briefly about 'guys not really loving girls who love sports' is a moment of activism. Harper was happy, was comfortable and safe in the stands watching her team. Charlie disrupts that and invades her sporting experience with his surveillance of her, a contrast to the perception that women are indeed the invaders of male-dominated sporting spaces and men's enjoyment of sport. Harper's comment is succinct, but equally her ongoing participation as a fan is also an active choice to dismiss Charlie's behaviour and not let it threaten her enjoyment of the game. This scene is an important reflection of the tensions women must wrestle with to maintain their place as fans, the decisions they make to prioritise their fandom and choices they make about challenging behaviours from others that can disrupt their enjoyment of sport. It's important we re-view Harper's agency and activism in this scene as she makes a choice to keep watching the game but also give her perspective of Charlie's attitude of 'girls who love sports'.

Another film that presents an interesting case study of the framing of women as fans is the 2005 US reproduction of Nick Hornby's book *Fever Pitch* (1992) of which spawned a 1997 UK film leading to the US remake that switches out football (soccer) fandom for baseball. Looking at the three texts and iterations of *Fever Pitch* provides a strong example of how powerful the re-viewing of women in sporting narratives can be to remove the gender lens and give legitimacy and agency back to the characters who had been written and read/watched without it (see Symons and McGowan, 2022). One scene in the US, baseball-centric film that illuminates the agency and

activism of the character of Lindsey, played by Drew Barrymore, shows how her emerging fandom intersecting with her desire to continue to excel in her career and secure a job promotion.

Throughout the duration of the film, Lindsey is judged and criticised by her romantic interest Ben, played by Jimmy Fallon, and the other fans around their season ticket holder seats in Fenway Park, including the other women, for her ‘new to baseball’ tendencies. While her small interest in baseball is a novelty at the beginning of the film and is an exciting prospect for Ben to indoctrinate her in the sport he loves so he doesn’t have to sacrifice sport for a relationship (echoing the idyllic sentiment expressed in *Set it Up*), Lindsey develops her own way to ‘do’ her fandom. However her fan behaviour is increasingly scrutinised and shamed by other fans. In one stark example of this, Lindsey takes her computer to Fenway Park so she can continue to work and also embrace her fandom which maybe we can read as being such a dedicated fan that she does not want to let her work impact her enjoyment of the game. This interpretation of fan authenticity is not awarded to Lindsey as I have previously explored in regard to this scene in additional research:

Embarrassed, Ben asks how long he has to ‘put up with’ Lindsey’s behaviour. And Lindsey, who notes that it is her third game in a week—baseball games frequently occur mid-week, in this case during Lindsey’s work hours—is figuratively and literally punished for a lack of total focus on the game and for not behaving like a ‘real fan’, when she is brutally hit on the head by a foul ball. (Symons & McGowan, 2022).

As an audience we are expected to read this as Lindsey should have known better than to behave in this egregious way, not being fully focussed on the game, thus deserving this punishment. The violence she experiences also serves as humour as the audience is framed to laugh at her misfortune, perhaps some kind of sports fan schadenfreude for her occupying a prized season ticket holder seat and being what was perceived by other fans as not fully invested in the game. She is perhaps taking up space that another more ‘deserving’ fan should have. The behaviour of the other fans surrounding Lindsey is never called into question. We don’t read their preoccupation with Lindsey’s behaviour as representative as not being ‘real fans’ when indeed, shouldn’t they be so taken with the game Lindsey’s behaviour should not impact them?

If we re-view Lindsey’s fan behaviour by removing the gendered lens and looking at what she is putting herself through by working desperately to win a promotion to progress her career, but still prioritising attending games—is she not displaying ‘real’ fan behaviour? (Symons & McGowan, 2022). Further, Lindsey does not let this incident deter her from being a fan and as the film develops. While there are complications to the romantic relationship between Lindsey and Ben, it is Lindsey that arguably maintains and prioritises her fandom and takes active steps to protect it. However, as an audience, we are not positioned to see Lindsey’s behaviours as authentic or demonstrative of true fandom. “The gendered framing of these behaviours mean they are viewed as disrespectful and ignorant to the norms of fandom and what is expected from outsiders entering the sacred space of the stadium (Wann

& Dolan, 1994), making her attainment of ‘real fan’ status untenable” (Symons & McGowan, 2022). I would argue Lindsey is an activist in *Fever Pitch*. She challenges Ben’s behaviour and judgement towards her as a romantic partner and emerging fan and while the relationship experiences turmoil, she maintains her fandom on her terms.

Moving from film to fan memoir where *Fever Pitch* led the way in developing literary fan narratives, Warren St. John’s, 2004 Alabama football fan memoir *Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer* also highlights a way that a woman is watched in the stands while she is watching the game and the gendered assumptions that come along with it. He details an experience where he watches a woman and makes assumptions about her fandom based on her appearance:

The young woman next to me is probably twenty or twenty-one, lithe and tall, with collarbones like wire hangers, perfectly pedicured toes the size of jelly-beans, and a feathery bob of brown hair that rustles seductively against the back of her neck when she stands to cheer. A red silk sundress seems to have floated down over frame the way a parachute might fall atop a small tree. She seems altogether too prim and refined to chat with a total stranger at a football game, but in the lull after an early Crimson Tide first down, I decide to give it a try.

“Great seats don’t you think?” I say.

I don’t give a damn about the seats”, the young woman barks. “I just hope Alabama kicks some ass!

A fan, I suppose, is a fan (St John, 2004, p. 73).

Here St John writes to somewhat excuse himself from making an assumption about the woman next to him and perhaps being pleasantly surprised that she is indeed, a ‘real fan’ from her response. But the commentary on this realisation is only provided in the succinct sentence, “A fan, I suppose, is a fan” and does not allow for introspection of the sexualised male gaze he placed on the fan first before he gives her some credit for being more of a fan than he first assumed.

The fan detailed in this exchange, although we only see her through the eyes of St John’s gaze, can also be read as enacting what Toffoletti and Mewett posit as a gendered re-claiming of space in hyper-masculine sporting environments. They state that “some female fans disturb, disrupt and challenge men’s claiming of sport as their domain, a number ‘masculinize’ themselves, while yet others perform gender in ways that simultaneously conform to and subvert masculine hegemony” (Toffoletti & Mewett, 2012, p. 5). In subsequent work, Toffoletti also highlights the post-feminist view of “women fans as simultaneously sexy and serious about sport” (Toffoletti, 2017, p. 467). Toffoletti explains this as the women who wish to adopt a hegemonic feminine identity (e.g., wearing heels, make-up, close-fitting clothing) who also consider themselves highly-identified sport fans (Toffoletti in Saver Coombs and Osbourne, 2022, pg. 140.) which can be considered an act of activism in embracing the elements of femininity that have been delegitimised and stigmatised in sporting environments.

Despite how organic and passionate the fan performances can be by women fans, these fans are constantly monitored, critiqued, and identified as other, in both nega-

tive or (often misguided) positive ways. The women portrayed in St John, the three iterations of *Fever Pitch* and *Set It Up* highlight that for women in a space where they are there to watch, rather than be watched, they are still subject to the male gaze whether they appear in non-fiction and memoir, or as crafted characters in fiction and film.

3 Beyond the Gender Boundaries

This fan policing is not limited to sex and gender but extends to other minority and marginalised groups who come to the traditionally white, male, and heteronormative environment of the sports arena. In one example to extend this concept beyond the boundaries of gender, Melbourne-based journalist and television presenter Waleed Aly wrote of a fan experience where he felt exposed as an intruder in the space he loves (Aly, 2005). Aly was facing a writing deadline but did not want to miss attending a game of his beloved Richmond Tigers, echoing the experience of Lindsey in *Fever Pitch* (2005). He therefore took his laptop to the game to work during the breaks. At half-time, Aly was approached by a security guard who told him that other fans had raised their concerns by reporting his actions as threatening. Aly questioned the guard who simply responded by saying, 'You know with the way things in the world are at the moment... Especially for dark people like you and me' (Aly, 2005). Aly suddenly felt exposed in the space he had come to for comfort. He portrays his conflicting emotions about his experience in his piece for *The Age*:

However I am meant to feel about this, I know how I did feel: humiliated. Never have I wanted so much to be invisible. I contemplated going home, but it is against my football supporter's code of honour.

And in any event, it would have looked even worse; as though I had no business there once I was found out. I had no idea who among the 30,000-strong crowd complained, but I could feel their burning, suspicious gaze upon me. I couldn't shake the thought that some unknown people suspected I might be a terrorist. I wondered if they were also Richmond fans, and for some irrational, tribal reason, the thought embarrassed me even more. (Aly, 2005)

Again, while Aly felt a gaze upon him and his fan authenticity challenged in a despicably racist way, he did not leave the stadium. He highlights his consideration to do so because of the hurtful impact of this experience, yet he made an active choice to stay. He mentions leaving is against his fan 'code of honour'. I would argue that staying is additionally in line with another code of honour, that of an activist who will not allow this horrific experience to expel him from the place he loves to be.

4 Conclusion

This paper deploys the practice of reflexive autoethnographic writing (see Delamont, 2009), textual analysis and re-viewing of popular texts (see Bairner, 2017) alongside critical engagement with sociological work on surveillance, gender performance and fandom to amplify and appreciate the seemingly small acts of activism women participate in as sports fans. I focused on the construction of the 'ideal' woman fan in a hyper masculine, heteronormative world, along with how inherent gender bias and social surveillance influences how women are perceived in the sports fan space and how this is reinforced in literature and popular culture. This has been achieved by engaging with the landscape of both the academic and popular literature that frames women in gendered and stereotypical ways and does not allow an audience to appreciate the agency and activism women project through their performance of fandom. This work also demonstrates how common the surveillance of women in sporting environments not only occurs on game day, but is depicted in several examples of sporting pop culture.

Fictional narratives are rich data sources and are often overlooked in sports research which is strange as sport is inherently linked with narrative history and storytelling. Fiction is where representations, and meaning, are created and reflected back to us for further connection and understanding and sport fiction can play a powerful role in our developing understanding of the diverse lived experiences of sports fans (see Bairner, 2017 and Hill, 2006). Additionally, I have included memoir, journalism and my own person reflections alongside the fictional film narratives to create a diverse dataset that positions, or more importantly re-positions women and others from marginalised groups to centre their lived experience and award their fan performances and identities the authenticity they deserved through their varied acts of activism.

The narratives I have included in this discussion however are not representative of all lived experiences and part of the problem when it comes to portrayals of fans in popular culture is that they are limited and mostly maintain sport as a domain of white men, Western ideals and heteronormative dynamics. Thus, the texts discussed in this paper, along with my own lived experience as a white, cis/het woman limit the broader discussion of intersectionality in the portrayals of sports fans. We need more visible sports narratives that explore the lived experiences, navigation and tension of more diverse communities to continue to challenge notions of 'authentic' fandom and ways of 'doing' fandom. What is central in these texts is that the fans who were depicted as outsiders all experienced social surveillance from other fans and made active choices to maintain their fandom.

This paper shows the need for varied representations of intersectional gendered experiences in the sports fan discourse as it is evident through analysing modern pop culture that women are generally still perceived as inauthentic fans (Pope, 2012) or invaders of male spaces (Klugman, 2016; Osbourne & Coombs, 2016). While scholars continue to emerge to address women's varied participation as sports fans (see Palmer & Toffoletti, 2019; Richards, 2018; Toffoletti, 2017; Sveinson and Hoeber, 2016), there is no current fictional literature that seeks to explore the complex, enduring, and passionate nature of the relationships that women fans have to the sports they love, and the fan cultures which they circulate through and in. Some women are

redressing this through non-fiction and memoir such as US-based sportswriters Jessica Luther and Kavitha Davidson's *Loving Sports When They Don't Love You Back* (2020) and Julie DiCaro's *Sidelined: Sports, Culture, and Being a Woman in America* (2021) however fiction and film remain mostly untouched.

The more stories we have that continue to portray the varied, complex and also exciting and empowering experiences women can have as fans in the stands, the more we will understand and value the contribution women give the game and perhaps we can one day not have to consider the act of remaining at the game despite constant social surveillance and act of activism.

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