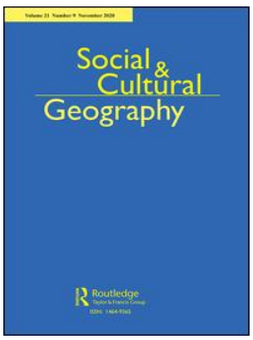

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# 'To us it's still Boundary Park': fan discourses on the corporate (re)naming of football stadia

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores how the corporate (re)naming of football stadia and their urban environs is negotiated through fans' toponymic discourses and associated commemoration. Critical toponymy research emphasises oppositional toponymic tensions between sovereign authorities and citizens, which can result in competing inscriptions of space. Adopting a quasi-ethnographic approach, we reveal a more complex picture by exploring the variegated toponymic discourses of football fans. The findings demonstrate intricate entanglements in how fans reluctantly accept a corporate stadium name, yet also actively resist it through counter-performative utterances, often imbued with commemorative intent. Alternatively, fans passively ignore a corporate stadium name, using a former toponym in quotidian and habitual speech. We conclude by considering the implications of these findings for the influence of corporate power in urban toponymic inscription.

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**Mots clefs**
célébration; toponymie critique; football; performativité; ethnographie

## "Para nosotros sigue siendo Boundary Park": discursos de los aficionados sobre la (re) denominación corporativa de los estadios de fútbol

Este artículo explora cómo la (re) denominación corporativa de los estadios de fútbol y sus entornos urbanos se negocia a través de los discursos toponímicos de los aficionados y la conmemoración asociada. La investigación de la toponimia crítica enfatiza las tensiones toponímicas de oposición entre las autoridades soberanas y los ciudadanos, que pueden resultar en inscripciones en competencia del espacio. Adoptando un enfoque cuasi-etnográfico, revelamos una imagen más compleja al explorar los variados discursos toponímicos de los fanáticos del fútbol. Los hallazgos demuestran intrincados enredos en la forma en que los fanáticos aceptan a regañadientes el nombre de un estadio corporativo, pero también lo resisten activamente a través de contra-declaraciones performativas, a menudo imbuidas de una intención conmemorativa. Alternativamente, los fanáticos ignoran pasivamente el nombre de un estadio corporativo,

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Due to ethical conduct guidelines from the authors' institutions, supporting data cannot be made openly available. To comply with ethical approval requirements, all transcripts from message boards and group discussions will be destroyed upon completion of the research project detailed in this article.

utilizando un topónimo anterior en el habla cotidiana y habitual. Concluimos considerando las implicaciones de estos hallazgos para la influencia del poder corporativo en la inscripción toponímica urbana.

## « Pour nous, c'est toujours Boundary Park »: commentaires de supporters sur le naming des stades de football

**RÉSUMÉ**

Cet article étudie comment la pratique de parrainage qui consiste à donner des noms de marque aux stades de football et à leur environnement urbain est négociée à travers les commentaires toponymiques des supporters et les commémorations associées. La recherche toponymique critique met l'accent sur les tensions toponymiques d'opposition entre les autorités souveraines et les citoyens, qui peuvent avoir pour résultat des inscriptions spatiales conflictuelles. En adoptant une approche quasi-ethnographique, nous révélons une réalité plus complexe avec un examen de divers commentaires toponymiques des supporters. Les résultats présentent des enchevêtrements compliqués dans la façon dont les supporters acceptent à contrecœur le naming commercial du stade, mais lui résistent aussi de manière active avec des propos contre-performatifs, souvent imprégnés d'intentions commémoratives. Les supporters ignorent aussi passivement le nom de marque attribué au stade et utilisent un ancien toponyme dans leurs conversations quotidiennes. Nous concluons en examinant les implications de nos constatations pour l'influence du partenariat dans l'inscription toponymique urbaine.

## 1. Introduction

Football stadia and their environs have meaning within society: as meeting points for locally embedded fan communities and sites for fans' collective celebration and disappointment over team progress (Edensor & Millington, 2010); as tourist destinations (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2005); and potentially as a nexus for wider urban regeneration and economic development (Bulley, 2002). Football stadia names are also toponyms (Light & Young, 2015); and selling their naming rights to corporate sponsors renders stadia, and the places they represent, as spatialised artefacts.

In 2019, 34 out of 92 English football league stadia bore an official corporate toponym (Football Ground Guide, 2019), reflecting Vuolteenaho and Kolamo's (2012) observation that 'English soccerscapes have been lately (re-)textualised as "landscape advertisements"' (p. 145). Such toponymic sponsorship has been articulated as 'selling home' (Boyd, 2000), and a form of 'symbolic violence' that can disenfranchise fans by 'reproducing social inequalities and the exclusion of particular groups and stakeholders', as well as presenting 'a growing threat to [the] public memory of places of many kinds' (Light & Young, 2015, pp. 440–441). This reflects wider concerns over toponymic privatisation within urban space (Berg, 2011; Medway & Warnaby, 2014; Rose-Redwood, 2011),

signaling an erosion of more 'democratic' place values, as befits the 'corporate seduction' (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p. 393) of neoliberal agendas.

Despite extensive research on the geographies of sport (for a multi-sport overview see Koch, 2017; for specific US sports, see Alderman et al., 2003; Wise & Kirby, 2020), and specifically football (Baker, 2018; Conner, 2014; Lawrence, 2016), there is only limited examination of the names of the venues in which these activities are, quite literally, played out. In relation to football stadia naming, such work (see Church & Penny, 2013; Vuolteenaho & Kolamo, 2012; and Medway et al., 2019, on which this paper builds) is grounded in critical toponymy (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010). Other work within the marketing discipline has addressed the corporate (re)naming of sporting venues, but typically focuses on sponsorship effectiveness (Chen & Zhang, 2011; Eddy, 2014; Haan & Shank, 2004; Woisetschläger et al., 2014).

We move beyond this previous research by seeking to understand how the corporate (re)naming of three English football stadia is negotiated through fan discourses. A key question concerns the extent to which this represents a neoliberalisation of urban space that threatens the coherence and topophilic embeddedness of football communities. Our focus on fans is important: for them the 'homes associated with football teams such as stadia can be seen as spiritual... [and] significant space[s]' (Baker, 2018, p. 189), and as Light and Young (2015) note, little is known about how these (re)naming practices 'are absorbed, consumed or resisted by fans' (p. 440). Such enquiry also relates to ongoing debates in critical geographies of sport – specifically how 'grassroots' developments may 'resist various elements of the neoliberal, globalized sporting world' (Jansson & Koch, 2017, p. 242).

We begin by outlining relevant critical toponymy debates, before detailing our study context and method. Empirical findings, relating to fan discourses of toponymic acceptance, resistance and persistence, and toponymic commemoration, are presented. This reveals a complex and variable picture of toponymic utterances, which affects fan perceptions and understandings of stadia spaces and urban environs. We conclude by discussing implications relating to the neoliberalisation of urban space through toponymic commodification.

## 2. Relevant debates in critical toponymy

Since the early 1990s, toponymic inquiry has taken a critical turn (Berg & Vuolteenaho, 2009; Rose-Redwood, 2011; Rose-Redwood et al., 2010). Within this work, there are three interconnected strands of analysis that are salient to our study: toponyms as (i) political practice, (ii) commemorative devices, and (iii) commodified entities.

### *2.1 Toponyms as political practice*

Critical toponymy literature suggests hegemonic actors/institutions assign toponyms to promote 'political legitimacy' (Cardoso & Meijers, 2017), and/or inscribe space with sociopolitical or historical values that typically support ruling elites (Azaryahu, 1996; Rose-Redwood, 2011; Wideman & Masuda, 2018; Yeoh, 2009). For football clubs and stadia, those elites typically comprise club owners and directors. Where corporate names are used as toponyms, the dissemination of brand values can also be a factor motivating their use.

However, individuals and groups can resist (or seemingly resist) toponymic imposition. This process can be relatively passive, either by ignoring a newly imposed toponym and/or continuing to use one assigned previously out of habit and the 'everyday relationships' people have with place names (Light & Young, 2014, p. 672). By contrast, resistance might be more active, with alternative, unauthorised toponyms, or different pronunciations, purposely employed and/or campaigned for (Alderman, 2002a; Azaryahu, 1996; Kearns & Berg, 2002; Yeoh, 2009).

Alderman (2008) presents active toponymic resistance as evidence that place names can 'be appropriated by marginalised stakeholders who wish to have a greater voice in determining what vision of the past is inscribed into the landscape' (p. 197). Similarly, Rose-Redwood (2008) argues this indicates the 'limits of sovereign authority over regimes of spatial inscription' (p. 875). Thus, if toponymic inscription is a performative act by political institutions, then active, conscious resistance constitutes an example of counter-performativity, which 'can also have liberating effects' (Wideman & Masuda, 2018, p. 1).

### 2.2 Toponyms as commemorative devices

Toponyms can also be used as commemorative devices, involving their semantic anchoring to the memory of a person, historical event(s), or even a previous toponym. This commemorative functionality draws strongly on autobiographical place memories (Medway & Warnaby, 2014; see also, Hoelscher & Alderman, 2004), which can be used by sovereign authorities to capitalise on certain historical associations that may help embed a particular socio-political worldview into a cityscape (Azaryahu, 1996; Yeoh, 2009). Sovereign authorities can also exert power by deciding on the spatial extent of commemorative toponyms, 'thereby enacting narrow social and spatial definitions of citizenship that restructure the scale and conditions under which one's voice matters in place naming' (Alderman & Inwood, 2013, p. 228).

Additionally, toponyms can be *de*commemorated, in an attempt to expunge events/individuals from collective civic/national memory. For example, street names in Bucharest commemorating a socialist past were changed by city authorities (Light & Young, 2014). Similarly, the Grand Arena of the Central Lenin Stadium in Moscow, was renamed Luzhniki Stadium in 1992 following the collapse of communism (Lisi, 2018). However, such acts of toponymic decommemoration relating to football stadia, or sporting venues more generally, have not attracted focused academic attention. Officially decommemorated toponyms can often remain part of everyday speech and citizens' lexicon of place signification. In Bucharest, therefore, socialist era street names are still used by some citizens, though this is largely through habit rather than conscious (re)commemorative intent (Light & Young, 2014). Clearly, toponymic commemoration is a complex issue, reflecting an innate polysemy in place naming practices and individual and societal responses to these (Azaryahu, 2011).

### 2.3 Toponyms as commodified entities

Existing research has examined toponymic commodification by governments to boost tourism spend (Shoval, 2013), and the transaction of toponymic opportunities as tradeable commodities (Karimi, 2016; Rose-Redwood et al., 2019). Another trend is the renaming of urban space for attempted economic gain; for example, by property developers

attempting to rename districts to boost land/property values (Medway & Warnaby, 2014), or by prioritising capital accumulation over social justice in the re-naming of streets (Brasher et al., 2020). A critical aspect of such 'top-down', politically formulated acts is how they affect people's geographical understandings and perceptions by undermining notions of a sense of place and 'home'. Unsurprisingly, therefore, attempts at toponymic commodification are sometimes successfully resisted by local communities, emphasising the limits of neoliberalism (Kearns & Lewis, 2019).

What makes toponymic commodification different for sporting stadia is the often direct use of a *commercial* name. As indicated above, existing work in the marketing literature has examined this phenomenon, but is largely concerned with investigating the success of sponsorship strategies, rather than analysing fans' reactions to corporate stadium (re)naming in detail. Yet there is evidence that football fans can strongly resist a new corporate toponym being applied to their club's stadium (Crompton & Howard, 2003; Edwards, 2012). Part of this resistance may be explained by Bale's (2003, p. 14) contention that 'sport is one of the few things that binds people to place simply through ascription'. Thus, changing the name of a sporting venue could be seen as an attack on citizens' place ties, highlighting the complex socio-political and spatial entanglements to be uncovered around the practice of corporate (re)naming for sports stadia.

## 3. Context and method

We examine three contrasting cases of English football clubs that have adopted a corporate stadium name within the last two decades. These are Manchester City, which plays in the Premier League (tier one of professional football), and Bolton Wanderers and Oldham Athletic from League Two[1] (tier four). Manchester City played at Maine Road from 1923–2003, before moving to a new stadium, originally built for the 2002 Commonwealth Games. When construction began in 1999 this stadium was referred to as 'Eastlands' after the area of the city in which it is located, but as the Commonwealth Games venue it officially became the 'City of Manchester Stadium' (notwithstanding Manchester City's move there in 2003). In 2011, the club agreed a deal with stadium owner Manchester City Council for control over the naming rights, leading to a ten-year sponsorship from airline operator Etihad (Taylor, 2011).

In 1997, Bolton Wanderers moved to the newly built 'Reebok Stadium', having previously played at Burnden Park since 1895. The Reebok Stadium was renamed 'Macron Stadium' in 2014, after an Italian sportswear brand; and in 2018 it became the 'University of Bolton Stadium'. Oldham Athletic's Boundary Park stadium dates from 1899, but in 2014 was renamed 'SportsDirect.com Park', following the signing of a five-year naming rights agreement with this retail company. However, in March 2018 the club announced a renegotiated deal with Sports Direct to reinstate the former stadium name of Boundary Park (Keay, 2018). Although this latter development occurred after our empirical data collection, it is considered in the findings below.

The three clubs are located within the relatively small geographic area of northwest England, yet capture different contextual nuances. Manchester City represents a renaming shortly after a stadium relocation; Bolton underwent a naming of a new stadium (which has subsequently undergone two further renamings); while Oldham represents a renaming of

an existing and long-established stadium. The clubs were purposively sampled to explore these different manifestations of (re)naming within a defined region.

Our research adopted a quasi-ethnographic approach, incorporating substantive primary data collection. This aligns with other recent critical toponymy studies that have engaged directly with citizens to examine how they use, or do not use, local place names within everyday speech (e.g. Light & Young, 2014; Rose-Redwood et al., 2019). First, over several weeks we initiated and participated in (overtly as researchers) threads relating to stadium (re)naming within online fan message boards for both Bolton Wanderers and Manchester City (after seeking permission from moderators). We were unable to obtain entrée to any message boards for Oldham fans. Relevant discussions and threads were saved as Word documents. Second, matches at all three clubs were attended, with observations recorded in field notes. This proved useful for examining the role of stadium names in collective forms of fan celebration such as chants and songs. Third, recognising the power of walking as a means of seeing space differently, and beyond the framing 'aesthetic control' of regulated urban design agendas (Edensor, 2008), the immediate locales around the three stadia were walked. Here, we used fieldnotes to capture any toponymic connections or rifts between current and former stadia names, and those of proximate streets/buildings. Fourth, group discussions (comprising four to six individuals) were held with self-identified loyal fans, incorporating broad-based question/topic prompts about corporate stadia (re)naming. An extra group discussion occurred with Oldham fans to compensate for a lack of message board insights. Discussions lasted approximately one hour and took place at mutually agreed venues. Recruitment was through supporters' association representatives and advertisements posted on fan message boards and social media, and researchers' personal contacts. Participants were predominantly male (14 males and four females), reflecting this gender bias amongst English football fans (Caudwell, 2011; EFL, 2015), and ranged from 20–69 years in age. All fans defined the team they supported as being 'local', typically clarifying this by the fact they, or their parents, were born in – and/or that they lived in, or near – the area surrounding their club's location. Discussions were recorded and transcribed.

Analysis began from the position of viewing all data as forms of text, which were subjected to an iterative form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved building up preliminary themes after coding the message board data and then reorganising, revising and modifying these following the coding of group discussion data and field notes. The process was first undertaken independently by each researcher. Subsequently, acknowledging the importance of confirmability in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1982), the authors collectively reviewed, negotiated and, where appropriate, merged their independent interpretations, thereby allowing for further thematic modification. We initially avoided engaging with official club representatives to ensure that it was primarily fan discourses that surfaced. However, following analysis of fan-related data, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior executives from each club to contextualise our identified themes in terms of club policies and priorities.

## 4. Fan discourses of toponymic acceptance

For newly built stadia, where no previous name exists, fans appear willing to adopt a corporate stadium name as they have minimal connection with the venue itself (Chen

& Zhang, 2011), and no memories attached to its physical space. This supports wider evidence showing how European sporting venues built since 1990 are more likely to be named after a corporate sponsor than those that are longer established (Vuolteenaho et al., 2019). As one Manchester City fan explained, 'I have no issues with the naming of the stadium after a sponsor as there is very little history here' (Manchester City fan e). Similarly, a Bolton fan noted: 'To be honest, I didn't mind because it was a totally new stadium, we had no feelings about it' (Bolton fan a).

This toponymic acceptance, or perhaps even indifference, appears fueled by money. The same Bolton fan continued:

> It's money for the club, it's as simple as that … At the end of the day Macron will pay good money to have their name up in lights like Reebok did, up on the stadium, so it helps the club (Bolton fan a).

Another Manchester City fan suggested, 'You can call it [the stadium] what you want' (Manchester City fan c), provided this came with a significant influx of sponsorship funds. Even for Oldham fans, whose club had occupied Boundary Park since 1899, the promise of corporate investment elicited a degree of acceptance of the new SportsDirect.com Park stadium name:

> The way I see it, it's two players a season. Two young players a season it pays for (Oldham fan f).

Others suggested that where stadium (re)naming deals are concerned, clubs should 'take the money and run' (Oldham fan b), noting that: 'It doesn't matter what the official name is … If someone offers me a million pounds, they can call it what they want' (Oldham fan d). Here, notions of the exchange-value of a stadium name (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010), in terms of what fans are willing to trade it for, are prominent.

By contrast, accepting sponsorship money for stadium naming rights was sometimes presented in an alternative light, as a concession made by fans in the face of overwhelming and inevitable market forces within the game:

> People moan about it, but we're powerless aren't we? We need the money that much. We would have let anybody come in and give us money to sponsor the ground … And that's unfortunately what football's come to (Oldham fan i).

In this choice between 'reality and ideality' (Chen & Zhang, 2011, p. 107), fans rationalise any displeasure in accepting corporate money with an attitude of reluctant pragmatism:

> It's almost sad that we're not as angry about it … It's a sad indictment of what the game's become; it's all about the money (Oldham fan h).

This evidences two distinctive and countervailing perspectives. On the one hand, fans construct discourses of toponymic acceptance in which they project themselves and their club as opportunistic and canny recipients of corporate 'free cash' (Oldham fan b). Alternatively, they portray themselves as victims of corporate power; drawn into accepting sponsorship money and associated toponyms in order to remain competitive in football, and thus becoming 'a pawn of this Borg-like moneyed monolith' (Boyd, 2000, p. 334). These discourses resonate with two broader analyses connected to the contemporary game. The former relates to fan power and resilience in the face of adversity (Parker & Stuart, 1997), and a deeply ingrained optimism connected to team performance. The latter considers the

damaging influence of big business in football and the fact that the game has changed irrevocably, and potentially for the worse, through the 'corporate destruction of football communities' (Brown, 2007, p. 624). In this regard, fans have little influence over the choice of a corporate stadium name. Indeed, there was no contextual evidence from our interviews with club executives that fans were genuinely consulted on such matters:

> If we felt that the sponsor was a good fit for the club … we wouldn't go out and consult fans … because we would take a view on whether it was suitable or not. That's our job to make that decision (Football club executive, identity anonymised).

This absence of fan involvement conveys a message that they are just paying customers (Boyd, 2000), with their degree of acceptance of a corporate stadium name a mere reactive response to a decision over which they have little control. Despite this, we later propose how fans may, paradoxically, maintain a significant stake in the toponymic utterances and accompanying discourses that help define the production of space in relation to their club and stadium.

## 5. Resistance and persistence

When toponyms are commodified their incorporation, or lack thereof, into everyday speech becomes a critical point of focus. Thus, Rose-Redwood et al. (2010, after Rose-Redwood, 2008) note that, 'if enough people refuse to recognize a commodified name, the official toponym itself may actually lose some of its own performative force' (p. 466). This identifies toponymic resistance as a conscious, purposeful act with counter-performative intent. Oldham fans, for example, recounted how they knowingly avoided using the name SportsDirect.com Park. One described it as a 'media name' (Oldham fan f) that is 'not recognised' by fans and local residents who continue to use the Boundary Park toponym. This discourse of overt resistance was repeatedly articulated:

> A million pounds is not a little amount of money … We accept it to a degree, but we're still never going to change that name. To us it's still Boundary Park and will always be Boundary Park (Oldham fan c).

Other Oldham fans framed this toponymic resistance as a power struggle between themselves and the 'they' of club and corporate authorities:

> *They* can call it what they want. Nobody here acknowledges the [SportsDirect.com Park] name (Oldham fan f; our emphasis).

However, the extent to which such resistance is down to conscious counter-performativity, as opposed to the persistence of deeply ingrained habits of speech, echoing the work of Light and Young (2014), is not always clear. As one fan explained:

> I think to the *hard-core fans that go there every week*, it's going to be Boundary Park (Oldham fan d; our emphasis).

Building on notions of toponymic persistence, as opposed to actively formed resistance, the Boundary Park name appears so woven into quotidian patterns of discourse within the locale, that the new stadium name is a weak and ineffective currency of place signification:

> I got a taxi to the game last week . . . I said, 'Can you take me to SportsDirect.com Park?' And he went, 'What? Boundary Park mate? Yeah, no worries my friend' . . . Nobody acknowledges it (Oldham fan f).

These persistent habitual utterances of the Boundary Park toponym are, perhaps, unsurprising considering the sponsor's lack of leverage of the corporate name. At the time of research (two years since the renaming deal), the stadium bore only one small sign referencing the SportsDirect.com brand over the stadium shop. No further efforts were made by Sports Direct to activate their naming rights prior to the club announcing the reinstatement of the Boundary Park name in 2018. Fans' lack of engagement with the SportsDirect.com Park stadium name was clearly important in arriving at this decision. Indeed, the new (early 2018) owner of the club is reported as saying:

> After speaking to Trust Oldham[2] and supporters, it was a priority for me to look at the options surrounding the stadium name and how we could go back to our traditions and heritage (Keay, 2018).

Fans from Manchester City and Bolton demonstrated little evidence of conscious, counter-performative resistance to existing corporate naming rights deals.[3] Again, therefore, any use of former stadium names was largely due to the persistence of habits in everyday speech, which were typically governed by the surrounding social context. Thus, Manchester City fans identified situations when they would refer to a matchday visit to the Etihad as 'going to Maine Road,' usually when talking to family and friends who would know what they mean. Bolton fans, by contrast, acknowleged the continued use of the former Reebok corporate name, but this was because Macron had failed to register with non-fans from the Bolton area as a toponym:

> It's for everyone else . . . isn't it? We [Bolton fans] go week in week out, so you get used to saying, 'Oh we're going to the Macron'. But obviously people don't go to the stadium very often so they don't know it's a change (Bolton fan a).

In fact, the Reebok toponym is now so embedded in the everyday discourse of Bolton citizens that it has become a shorthand for an area surrounding the Bolton Wanderers stadium:

> It's surprising how many people when they're going shopping in the Middlebrook [the retail park adjoining the stadium] say, 'We're going shopping at the Reebok' (Bolton fan c).

In summary, whilst evidence exists of counter-performative resistance by Oldham fans against a corporate stadium name, habit and inertia in discourse has also contributed to the continued use of the original Boundary Park toponym amongst fans and non-fans alike. Furthermore, this toponymic persistence may play an even greater role in explaining any ongoing utterances of former stadium toponyms amongst both Bolton and Manchester City fans and non-fans. Woisetschläger et al. (2014) appear to label any use of a previous stadium name as a resistant act, but we would suggest this is an oversimplification. Rather, the persistence of former toponyms emphasises that there may simply be a lack of interest, concern or even knowledge about a stadium's current name. This emulates Light and Young's (2014) critique of academic scholarship's assumed importance of the significance invested in street names by citizens, acknowledging that reactions to place names can be 'rooted in more ambivalent and personal emotional geographies' (p. 672). Such a view

resonates with our findings regarding the limited ability of new corporate stadium names to be fully adopted within, and beyond, a club's fan base; in turn, raising questions over the performative limits of corporate power in football.

The evidence of Oldham fans' stronger resistance to the corporate renaming of their stadium also suggests that this kind of opposition escalates significantly when it involves a long-established venue. This may reflect a spatial sedimentation of fans' longstanding individual and collective practices in and around older football grounds, and the consequent development of a deeply-rooted sense of place that becomes intertwined with a given stadium toponym. In this manner, '[t]he collective expressions performed in the historical, cultural setting of the stadium . . . sustain the relations between people, and between people and place' (Edensor, 2015, p. 83). Supporting this contention, both Bolton and Manchester City fans were vocal in their *imagined* resistance to the renaming of the original grounds from which they had moved, and identified that had this happened their reactions 'would have been a different story' (Manchester City fan i). Clearly, there is a strong interplay here between time and space, and the fact that the passing of the former can help anchor fans' perceptions and understandings of the latter. As one Manchester City fan noted: 'I wouldn't have been happy at all had it been Maine Road that would have been changed . . . because we were there so long' (Manchester City fan a). Similarly, for Oldham Athletic, where an official corporate renaming of an existing stadium *has* occurred, justification of the continued use of the Boundary Park toponym was framed as relating to its temporal tenacity as a signifier of a fixed point on the earth: 'We've not moved, so Boundary Park will always be Boundary Park' (Oldham fan b).

## 6. Practices of (and perspectives on) toponymic commemoration

Edensor (2015) emphasises how the accretion and layering of fans' spatially-rooted memories within their stadium form an important part of their identification with a football club. Accordingly, the removal of a former stadium name could be perceived by fans as an act of official toponymic decommemoration, and a disruption of the place-specific memories they associate with their club. This is arguably a case where the lure of sponsorship money is prioritised over a club's distinctiveness (Reysen et al., 2012) and fans' identity (Woisetschläger et al., 2014). It is a situation that may be further exacerbated when corporate stadia names are short-lived, or exhibit banal interchangeability as sponsorship deals come and go.

Aware of fans' potentially negative views of corporate (re)naming, club authorities (working with developers) can make efforts to mitigate these by invoking the deliberate commemoration of former toponyms. For example, a road running adjacent to the current University of Bolton Stadium is named 'Burnden Way', after the former Burnden Park ground (Medway et al., 2019). This adds another strand to extensive work examining the use of commemorative street naming in writing and reinforcing narratives of identity within urban space (e.g. Alderman, 2000; Azaryahu, 1996; Rose-Redwood, 2008; Yeoh, 2009). The Burnden Way road name can therefore be interpreted as a performative act of spatial inscription by sovereign authorities (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010); it serves as an intertextual bridge for fans, facilitating recall and celebration of former club glories, and supporting notions of a 'memory place' (Boyd, 2000, p. 330). As one Bolton fan elaborated in relation to Burnden Way: 'It's keeping the history, bringing the history with it' (Bolton fan a).

Officially sanctioned toponymic commemoration is also evidenced in club-approved souvenirs. For example, in Oldham Athletic's shop we purchased a nostalgic keyring depicting the original Boundary Park name. Ironically, this item was being sold (at the time of fieldwork) by the stadium naming rights holder (and operator of the club shop) SportsDirect.com. However, the Oldham Athletic executive interviewed emphasised that the keyring was less about the club wishing to commemorate a former toponym, and more a case of the corporate sponsor capitalising on fans' nostalgia by merchandising what it perceived to be commercially viable commemorative goods.

This focus on commercial motivations underpinning the toponymic commemoration invoked by organisations was also witnessed during fieldwork, notably when we queued for pies at 'Maine Road Chippy' before a Manchester City home match. The premises were outside the curtilage of the stadium in an old Victorian building. From here we looked directly across at Manchester City's current ground, illuminated with one-metre high blue lettering declaring 'ETIHAD STADIUM' – historic and new toponyms directly juxtaposed. Here was a business keen to leverage fans' valorisation of the former stadium name to help attract match-day custom.

In other instances, organisational commemoration of former stadia names is more altruistic. For example, on the site of Bolton Wanderers' former Burnden Park ground is an ASDA supermarket. The grocery store reflects the footballing history of its location through its name, 'ASDA Burnden Park', along with large photographs inside showing scenes from the old stadium and a plaque remembering a crush of fans there in 1946 that claimed 33 lives. This helps position the former ground as a memory place within the realm of everyday life (Azaryahu, 1996; Dickinson, 1997), and highlights the importance of locational authenticity in toponymic commemoration. Critically, fans do not perceive the 'ASDA Burnden Park' name as being commercially oriented. Rather, it appears to be viewed as a sensitive acknowledgement of the interplay between the surrounding community and the heritage of the local team, and the way both are woven into the fabric of the place on which a supermarket now stands. As one fan states: 'You go to the ASDA there, you're back at Burnden Park aren't you?' (Bolton fan c). This echoes the work of Hague and Mercer (1998), who demonstrate how a football club can act as important source material for the construction and maintenance of a locally-rooted and shared 'geographical memory'.

At the matches we attended, visual manifestation of toponymic commemoration by fans within stadia was lacking. An exception was a Bolton match, where we witnessed a fan's banner declaring 'Farewell Burnden Park'. Conversely, we regularly heard references to former stadia names in songs and chants. At Bolton matches fans sang the song *Burnden Aces*, which references the club's original home and its location on Manchester (Manny) Road with the lines:

> . . . All the lads and lasses, smiles upon their faces,
>
> Walking down the Manny Road to see the Burnden Aces.

In examining this song's continued popularity, some fans were keen to emphasise its commemorative purpose, positioning it as a cultural artefact that has emerged over time and is imbued with meaning and memories:

> Burnden Aces are a different time . . . When they're singing about the Burnden Aces they'll be thinking about a specific era, specific players, and it's not yet associated with the players that were at the Reebok (Bolton fan a).

Other Bolton fans presented the singing of *Burnden Aces* as being less about commemoration, and more of a consciously performed act of toponymic resistance that knowingly foregrounds the memories associated with Burnden Park against the lack of meaning in more recent stadium names:

> History started a long time before the Premier League and a very long time before the Reebok. The affiliation of the song isn't to a footwear/clothing company, so you're not going to change Burnden to Reebok/Macron/QuickQuid or whoever – that'd be plain stupid (Bolton fan i).

In the Etihad Stadium, the first verse of the popular *We are City* chant of Manchester City fans identified their former Maine Road ground as home. There were suggestions that its persistence since the club's move from the former stadium was less a reflection of commemorative value, and more a result of habits in speech, and the fact that the *We are City* chant was too deeply rooted within the collective psyche of the fan base to be changed:

> It's historical. That was sung when we were at Maine Road, and so you just continue it . . . there's no Etihad song (Manchester City fan a).

The absence of an Etihad song also highlights the temporary nature of corporate stadium names (Boyd, 2000), suppressing the impetus for fans to devise chants and songs that incorporate them. As one fan noted: 'Stadiums now are changing their name so readily that . . . you start singing a song and the next thing it's gone' (Bolton fan c).

A further layer of complexity is added by the fact that our attendance at Bolton's home matches was always accompanied by the *Burnden Aces* song being broadcast over the public address system immediately pre-match, along with projected images of past players and former club glories. Similarly, at Manchester City's home matches we witnessed the playing of *Boys in Blue* – a song referencing the Maine Road name – in the match build-up, accompanied by footage of historic games (some at the Maine Road stadium) on a giant screen. In both instances most of the home crowd joined in. These broadcasts appear to deliver officially sanctioned versions of toponymic history and commemoration that are willingly repeated by fans, either with counter-performative intent, or through the habit of match-day rituals. We propose that these potential subversions of the current stadium name are acceptable to club authorities because they are controllable within stadium space, and for a time-bounded period. For Bolton fans, making the Burnden toponym a focus for commemoration in song also circumvents use of the stadium name associated with the sponsor prior to Macron, and any 'corporate awkwardness' that might arise from this – in effect, a tacit decomemmoration of the Reebok toponym. The purposeful playing of *Burnden Aces* at the start of matches therefore delivers an institutional steer to fans' toponymic and commemorative utterances, yet in so doing perversely encourages the use of counter-speech in the form of the non-corporate, original stadium name.

The above discussion demonstrates that the strength of emotional ties between fans and club creates ideal conditions for the persistence of intertextual meaning embedded in

the commemoration of past stadium names. As well as being evident in official and institutionally defined spatial ordering devices such as street names, or the names of independent business premises, we have shown that there is also potential for toponymic commemoration to emerge from fan sources in the form of culturally grounded, fan-based artefacts such as songs and chants. All of these acts simultaneously draw upon and reinforce fans' collective sense of club history, which itself may be linked to the particular geography of English football. Specifically, clubs and their fans often have strong connections to a given locale and the unique built environment of a stadium and its environs (Edensor, 2015; Edensor & Millington, 2010). Thus, spatially-rooted memories are both products of toponymic commemoration and essential resources for it, demonstrating the importance of the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and understanding about club histories between supporters. This was illustrated in our group discussion with Bolton fans, who talked about how younger supporters will ask older family and friends about the *Burnden Aces* song, thereby facilitating the endurance of this historical point of reference. Such findings echo work on music fans, who have been shown to preserve, pass on and co-create memories through graffiti (Alderman, 2002b) and the naming of businesses (Gunderman & Harty, 2017). Whatever the focus, it is evident that fans can be active co-creators of particular cultural geographies; inscribing memories of clubs, stadia, bands or artists into their everyday cultural landscapes and the places they visit.

Conversely, because fans' toponymic commemoration is so evidently reliant on intertextual memory and interpretation, the commemorative power of older stadium names may weaken over time. This will occur as new generations of fans emerge without personal or inherited recall of former stadia and/or previous toponyms – a semiotic decoupling of the textual signifier from its historical and locationally-signified referent (Azaryahu, 1996). Moreover, such a reading frames toponymic commemoration as a consciously performed act, reliant on the intertextual cognisance of those undertaking and receiving this performance, without which any spoken, sung or written use of a former toponym arguably moves from an act of commemoration to a mere free-floating signifier, embedded in the routines of everyday discourse. This echoes Light and Young's (2014) suggestions that what might pass as the societal contestation of new toponyms may be as much down to habit/inertia in using older toponymic forms as it is to active toponymic resistance. Equally, we suggest that what might pass as *commemoration* of former toponyms may also result from similar habitual influences. Furthermore, distinguishing between toponymic resistance, toponymic habit/inertia or persistence, and toponymic commemoration becomes challenging, and largely down to a subjective evaluation of the contextualising discourses in which toponymic utterances are embedded.

## 7. Discussion and conclusion

Critical toponymy literature has emphasised some broad binary tensions in toponymic practices and how these inscribe space. On the one hand, significant work acknowledges performative limits to regimes of toponymic spatial inscription enacted by sovereign authorities. This suggests that official toponyms are constantly open to unofficial versions and 'myriad counter performances' (Rose-Redwood, 2008, p. 891), aligning with Thrift's (2003) assertion that the 'fabric of space is so multifarious that there are always holes and tears in which new forms of expression can come into being' (p. 2023). Such arguments

are rooted in notions of counter-memory (Foucault, 1977) and associated practices of counter-speech (Butler, 1997). These provide the basis for consciously invoked perlocutionary toponymic utterances that (re)signify space, and which may be intentionally repeated or copied by multiple individuals. On the other hand, Light and Young (2014) imply that toponymic counter-performance as an act of intentional contestation/defiance against official place naming practices might be overstated. Drawing on Edensor (2009) and Duff (2010), they identify how passive, unreflexive and precognitive habits, routines and inertia are important in the persistence of longstanding toponymic practices. In these instances, everyday toponymic utterances might be misconstrued as purposeful and active resistance to newly sanctioned place names.

Our investigation suggests that the interplay between official toponymic practices and social actors is more multi-dimensional and inconsistent than previous work has indicated. We surface intricate entanglements in how football fans accept, actively shun, or passively ignore corporate stadium names; demonstrating that such actions can present very different interpretations and understandings of stadium space, and its surrounding and associated areas, across various time-space contexts.

At one level, fans' acceptance of corporate stadium names is governed by whether a stadium is newly built or long-established; and whether forfeiting the previous stadium name is perceived as a good financial deal for their club. Yet dig below the surface and a more complex picture is revealed. Manchester City fans vacillate between public acceptance of the Etihad name as a financially pragmatic media reality, but revert to more habitual naming practices in everyday speech with family and friends. However, this is not, arguably, active resistance in which the old Maine Road name is consciously counter-performed, rather it reflects a situation in which the Etihad name appears unable to dislodge the semiotic dominance of longstanding toponymic practices.

For Oldham fans, it was difficult to draw a clear line between their active resistance to a new corporate stadium name and the persistence of ingrained routines of semantic memory relating to the original toponym. This is reflective of fans' continued attendance at the same stadium, which has acquired little visible evidence of the SportsDirect.com naming rights sponsor. Here, toponymic resignification is realised primarily as a form of corporate rhetoric, rather than a lived spatial reality – a view reinforced by the fact that the club shop still sells memorabilia referencing Boundary Park, and outside the stadium the street name 'Boundary Park Road' remains unchanged. These circumstances make it easier for Oldham fans to appear defiantly resistant towards the new corporate toponym, whilst also accepting any money it brings. Furthermore, the fact that fans have not had to significantly alter their match-day geographies and mobilities to adjust to a new ground may have helped maintain stability in their toponymic discourse.

Many Bolton fans continue to refer to their current stadium as 'the Reebok'. This appears to be driven by habit, coupled with the fact that the Macron name failed to gain significant traction amongst the wider community. Yet although the Reebok toponym is still regularly uttered by Bolton fans when referring to their current stadium, it is not the name of the club's original home, but a corporate name used for 17 years between 1997 and 2014 – a period when the club experienced some success in the Premier League. This suggests that habit and inertia in toponymic utterances can also apply to former corporate stadia names, particularly if they were around for long enough and during a period when a club performed well on the pitch.

Fans' sense of club history and the importance attached to former stadium names clearly plays a key role in toponymic commemoration, and it is easy to imagine how such commemoration could be misconstrued as toponymic resistance. However, the fact that the clubs studied also invoke historic toponymic commemoration (e.g. by renaming roads or broadcasting matchday songs that reference former stadium names), without appearing to jeopardise current naming rights sponsorship arrangements, indicates that such commemorative activity has minimal bearing on whether the fan base finds a new corporate name acceptable, or is resistant to it.

In conclusion, whilst corporate power in football may seem like an unstoppable force, it does not necessarily follow that it will always reach into the spaces of fan communities, at least where stadium names are concerned. Whilst fans sometimes use a corporate stadium name, it is usually when it suits them to do so, highlighting that toponymic geographies can be subtler than the imposition of top-down regimes of performative spatial inscription, and a subsequent acquiescence or counter-performative resistance to these. Consequently, the corporate appropriation of football space(s) occurs more on fans' terms than might initially be realised. Certainly, our analysis suggests that any overtures of corporate involvement in football via toponymic inscription are potentially undermined by fans' unconscious, routinised and everyday acts of speech. Furthermore, if these corporate spatial interventions move beyond an acceptable threshold, as witnessed with Oldham Athletic and the change of the Boundary Park stadium name, then fans appear to demonstrate a more conscious form of counter-performative, toponymic resistance. A question remains as to where that acceptable threshold lies, and whether it can be circumvented by the promise of corporate largesse.

In sum, we contend that concerns over the commodification of community space and 'selling home' (Boyd, 2000) via the corporate (re)naming of football stadia may be an unwarranted panic over neoliberal creep. This does not deny that corporate involvement in football can affect social geographies of the game in negative ways by, for example, significantly increasing ticket prices, or acting as a financial catalyst for new stadia developments, which can unsettle fans' long-established match-day spatial routines (Edensor & Millington, 2010). Nevertheless, we suggest a more optimistic outlook, and that fans' resilience may be underestimated. Certainly, the fans in our study have maintained a significant and potentially controlling stake in the toponymic utterances and accompanying discourses that help define the political production of space in and around their clubs. Personal, emotional and quotidian understandings of stadium spaces and their environs cannot, it seems, be easily erased or usurped by corporate power.

Going forward, future work could consider the social and spatial implications of such naming practices in relation to other sporting and entertainment venues, public buildings and spaces, suggesting a rich field of intersection between sports geographies, critical toponymy and urban geography. In addition, our study has examined the variegated toponymic discourses of self-defined loyal fans who see their team as being 'local'. Further research could therefore examine the potentially contrasting reactions to corporate stadium (re)naming amongst the increasingly globalised, non-local fan base of elite clubs like Manchester City. Beyond sport, public reaction to commercially-driven name changes is being played out in various urban contexts, including streets (Brasher et al., 2020; Karimi, 2016) and the buildings of public institutions like schools and universities (Blocher, 2007; Drennan, 2012). The physical and infrastructural fabric of cities should, therefore, be a key focus for ongoing research into

the toponymic commodification of space and associated place identity. Such enquiries would undoubtedly widen our understanding of the geosemiotic and political traction of corporate toponyms in spatial inscription, delineation and wider placemaking activities.

## Notes

1. Bolton Wanderers and Oldham Athletic have both been relegated from higher tiers since fieldwork took place.
2. The Oldham Athletic Supporters' Trust.
3. An exception from the wider fan community is Manchester City supporter Ken Hurstfield, who campaigns for the Etihad Stadium to be called 'Eastlands' (www.eastlandsblue.co.uk). This demonstrates that toponymic resistance can be an individual as well as a collective endeavour.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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