

Hallowed place, toxic space: ‘Celebrating’ Steve Bartman and Chicago Cubs’ Fan Pilgrimage

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Abstract:

This paper is about travelling and exploring, assessing the historical importance of fan pilgrimages and the geographic spaces in which, and through which, fans travel to get closer to their object of fandom. But it also about how those spaces can become toxic, acting as painful reminders of the object turned bad, tragic failure and community rejection. Through a case study of the Steve Bartman incident during the 2003 National League baseball championship playoff game between the Chicago Cubs and Florida Marlins at Wrigley Field, and an auto-ethnographic study of the physical grounds and stadium, I present ongoing research into fan tourism and sports fandom. The vitriolic reception Bartman received when he inadvertently interfered with a potentially game-winning play that might have seen the Cubs reach their first World Series since 1945 highlights toxic fan behavior familiar to many sports. However, that the seat he occupied on the night serves as an unofficial monument to that moment suggests that even in great controversy and disappointment, Cubs fans find physical space and ‘being there’ just as important to winning or celebrating success. Fans of the Cubs are open in describing themselves as the unlucky losers (e.g. not having won the World Series since 1908 until only this past season), building a fan identity defined by a so-called ‘curse’ and based on years of past failures. Therefore, what happened around the Bartman incident and the fact that his seat is a fan tourist site visited by baseball fans and Cub enthusiasts alike tells us that being a fan is not just about celebrating the good or remembering the great but also about recognizing the bad and mourning the worst. Visiting and documenting through taking selfies at locations within the stadium, especially Bartman’s seat, act as cathartic rituals brought to life through physical objects. Offering Cubs fans a chance to come to terms with their team’s failures and celebrate their fandom of the team, for good or ill, no matter what it costs in terms of emotional distress.

Key words: Baseball, Toxic Fan Practice, Fan Pilgrimage

This article is about travelling and exploring, assessing the historical importance of fan pilgrimages and the geographic spaces in which, and through which, fans travel to get closer to their object of fandom. But it is also about how those spaces can become toxic, acting as painful reminders of the object turned bad, involving tragic failure and community rejection. Through a case study of the Steve Bartman incident during the 2003 National League baseball championship playoff game between the Chicago Cubs and Florida Marlins at Wrigley Field, and an analysis of the physical grounds and stadium, I present ongoing research into fan pilgrimages and their relationship with toxic sports fandom. The vitriolic reception Bartman received when he inadvertently interfered with a potentially game-winning play that might have seen the Cubs reach their first World Series since 1945 highlights toxic fan practices familiar to many sports. However, that the seat he occupied on the night serves as an unofficial monument to that moment suggests that even in great controversy and disappointment, Cubs fans find physical space and ‘being there’ important in different ways to winning or celebrating team success.

Fans of the Cubs are open in describing themselves as the unlucky losers (e.g. having finally won the World Series in 2016, their first victory since 1908), building a fan identity defined by a so-called ‘curse’ and based on years of past failures. Therefore, what happened around the Bartman incident, and the fact his seat is a fan tourist site visited by baseball enthusiasts and Cubs fans alike, tells us that being a fan is not just about celebrating the good or remembering the great, but it is also about recognizing the bad and mourning the worst. The toxic reactions of those fans that treated Bartman with vitriol during, and long after the game, highlight the divisive nature of fandom and the multiplicity of emotions felt when confronted with disappointment. Thus visiting and documenting fannish visits through several acts, including taking selfies at locations within the stadium, occupying Bartman’s seat, and re-enacting the infamous catch attempt, serve as what I term ‘practices of atonement’. These rituals are made more real through physical interaction with space and object and offer Cubs fans a chance to come to terms with their team’s failures, exorcise the so-called ‘curse of the Billy goat’, and generally celebrate their fandom, for good or ill. Moreover, in light of Bartman’s treatment, they also work as cathartic acts through which fans come to terms with how they might have acted and felt, seeking some form of repentance for toxic fan practices.

This paper is based on a site visit to Wrigley Field in 2016 (the season where the ‘curse’ came to an end with the Cubs winning the World Series). It combines methodologies from fan studies, tourism and sports studies. Using an autoethnographic approach, observing fan interactions with space and place within the baseball park – particularly with Bartman’s seat and other associated fan spaces – I analyze how they become significant through performance, photography and celebration. I also discuss media coverage of the Bartman incident at the time, including how the city’s sports scene continues to cite the moment as pivotal within Chicago Cubs history with journalists referencing it in subsequent stories about Bartman. This helps to measure the decreasing toxicity after the fact, as Cubs fans reflect on their own reactions and behavior during and after the game.

In terms of defining toxicity and the toxic fan practices discussed in the following sections I want to briefly reflect on previous work on the subject. In his analysis of toxic fan reactions to the rebooted *Ghostbusters* franchise, William Proctor acknowledged the ubiquity of such feelings within fandom:

Fan quarrels and conflicts are not a new phenomenon, either, but the migration from the (analogue) margins and into the (digital) mainstream has exposed the various operations of fan cultures to the larger online public encapsulated by blogs, vids, tweets, comments, and social media' (2017, p. 1124).

This is certainly true in terms of popular media texts and the growing mainstreaming of fan culture, but in terms of sports fandom there has always been exposure to 'the good, bad and the ugly' of fan behavior: from the celebrated venues of global events such as the FIFA World Cup to the more extreme representations of football hooliganism, sports fans have been televised, mediated and demonized in the popular press. Toxic practices such as defamatory chanting to all-out fights in and outside of the stadium have been ever present on our television screens. TV brings sports fandom into our living rooms, whether we support or follow the sport in question. In the case of Bartman, a nationally televised game which meant so much for both sets of fans (for the Cubs even more so because of the history of failure over the years) attracted far more attention from general sports fans, commentators and journalists. When the traditionally 'Friendly Confines' become the site for such toxicity, then it adds further significance because of the rarity of such practices in baseball generally, and within the sacred place more specifically.

I would also want to point to the work of Vivi Theodoropoulou (2007) who analyzed the 'anti-fan' within the 'fan' in relation to supporters of two Greek football clubs. Her argument highlights the conflicting nature of sports fandom, based on intense passion for and identification with 'your' team as opposed to a similar intensity of hatred and familiarity with 'the other' team:

Sports fans, in fact, take great pleasure in talking and arguing with anti-fans. They enjoy participating in a 'game,' as they call it, of exchanging witty lines with their 'rivals' and take up a contest of who will defend and prove that her/his fan object is better' (2007, p. 323).

In the case of Bartman and the toxic fan behavior directed at him during the now infamous game, I would argue that this was an example of fans turning on one of their own. It was an attempt to defend their fan object and their own sense of Cubs fan identity from yet another example of the 'curse' coming back to ruin the team's latest chance for success. Both Proctor and Theodoropoulou acknowledge the importance of defense and protection for fans who display toxicity through practices such as personal deformation and attacking other texts. In terms of the Bartman incident, the toxicity I analyze was about defending the

fan object (the Cubs), but also about protecting the fans themselves from further disappointment.

Bartman and the Backlash

Holding a three games to two lead over the then Florida Marlins in the 2003 National League Championship Series, the Cubs had the opportunity to win game six and get to the World Series for the first time in more than two generations. The game on October 14 was going well for the Cubs as they were leading the Marlins 3-0 in the eighth inning. However, a supposedly simple foul ball high along the third base line became the turning point for fan expectations as the Marlins were seemingly let off the hook, allowed to take a lead into the final inning, and finally won the game 8-3. Instead of catching the foul ball before it went into the seats, left fielder Moisés Alou missed, impeded by its proximity to a number of fans, including Steve Bartman, who reached out to catch it as a potential souvenir. The impact of the missed catch and Bartman's apparent interference did not really cause fans in the ballpark to react angrily until the game started to get away from the Cubs. When the Marlins took the lead, and the Cubs failed to respond on the field, fans started to pinpoint Bartman as the focus of their increasing frustration. Media attention during the live broadcast started to filter through the crowd as some commentators and fans deemed that Bartman had prevented Alou from making an easy catch. Alou's angry reaction, aimed at those fans that had tried to grab the ball, also focused fan attention to that area of the ballpark.

Bartman, infamously wearing a Cubs hat and conspicuously listening to the radio commentary through headphones, drew much of the fans' anger. Beer containers, peanuts and other projectiles started to rain down on him from levels above where he was sitting. Fans around him started to point fingers and gesture to others that it was the man with the headphones who had supposedly robbed Alou of the ball. During the television coverage cameras showed fans shouting insults and gesticulating at Bartman; voices could be heard over the stadium microphones shouting various profanities, blaming him for the losing situation in which the Cubs had found themselves. To prevent Bartman or those fans sitting near him getting hurt by increasingly aggressive fan reactions ballpark security ushered him out of the stadium – yet this only seemed to agitate fans more. Now with the opportunity for others to see whom fans were shouting at, Bartman became a moving target as he was escorted with two companions down the aisle and into the walkway under the stands. Fans continued to throw things and shout insults and, as he exited the seating, some fans followed so they could vent their anger and frustration rather than continue watching the game. In the 2011 documentary *Catching Hell* (written and directed by Alex Gibney), footage of what happened to Bartman during the game demonstrates just how volatile fans were, and how shocked Bartman was in the face of such fan wrath. In John Anderson's (2011) review of the film he notes that

fans in Wrigley expected something to go wrong, just as it had so many times before. Bartman, in his glasses, sweatshirt and headphones (actually listening to a broadcast of the game at the time) – simply whipped a stadium full of masochists into a frenzy.

Indeed, Gibney's attempt to understand why Bartman attracted such vitriol provides an interesting examination of how Bartman became a scapegoat for the Cubs' mistakes during the game, and a scapegoat for their continued bad luck in failing to reach the World Series.

The backlash in Chicago was immense, signalling the intensity of fan emotions around the Cubs' loss and how the 'curse' (which I discuss in more detail below) seemed to manifest again in the actions of one baseball fan. Radio phone-in shows were abuzz with fans demanding that Bartman be punished somehow and threats suggested that if fans bumped into him in the street they could not be held accountable for what they would do to him. Website images depicted Bartman as the Wild West's most wanted, a felon on the run who needed to be caught so he could atone for his crime. Somewhat unsympathetically, the then governor of Illinois told the press that Bartman should be placed in witness protection and Jed Bush, then governor of Florida, offered him asylum (see 'Baseball Fan Feels Chicago's Fury'). Intended or not, these sorts of comments from politicians worked to incite, rather than to restrain, fan ire. Shortly after, the media wanted to capture Bartman on camera so he could explain his attempt at catching the ball and whether or not he blamed himself for the team's loss. However, as soon as the press found out where he lived, Bartman went into hiding. To this day, his whereabouts are largely unknown and he has not responded to requests for interview. He does not appear in the documentary *Catching Hell*, other than in media footage of the game. In the only statement he released, printed in the *Chicago Sun-Times* two days later, he apologised for not being aware of the potential play Alou had on the ball and stated that he was just focused on catching it like any fan would have been (in Sweeney, 2003, p. 9). Multi-million dollar offers for Bartman to appear in commercials, retrospectives and at recent Cubs games have not been accepted. Despite the Cubs' World Series win in 2016, Bartman does not want to return to the ballpark or be seen in front of fans. Since the Cubs' World Series victory, many fans consider the 'curse' broken and the incident has become part of ballpark history that I will explore further in relation to fan pilgrimage. How fans now remember and re-enact what Bartman did that night has become part of their experience when visiting the ballpark. The physical space where he sat and the crowd became angry is a site of identification where fans reflect on the Bartman incident but also on their own fandom.

Wrigley Field and the Curse of the Billy Goat

Sports arenas represent familiar and personal spaces for fans. Football (American, Australian, Canadian and soccer), baseball, cricket, basketball, ice hockey, rugby and all popular team sports with mass followings are played in physical surroundings that encourage familiarity and loyalty. Over long periods of time, during a playing season and

spanning several decades and generations, sports arenas often become like 'second homes' to fans that regularly turn up to watch, cheer on and celebrate their favourite local team. This is particularly familiar to the Chicago Cubs who have played baseball at Wrigley Field in Chicago's North Side neighbourhood since 1916. The stadium has been dubbed the 'Friendly Confines' and the team, successful or not, has attracted a devoted and large hometown fan-base, many of whom view the space as quite personal and representative of that long-term and established fandom. However, visiting Wrigley Field, even for casual non-fans who just love baseball, is also an important act of pilgrimage – the environs are historic, the ballpark traditional, and the team has a certain quality being one of the oldest in the league. Indeed, Wrigley Field is the second oldest ballpark after the Boston Red Sox's Fenway Park. The stadium is not only home to the present day team but areas of the ballpark are highlighted as historic, important and hallowed. Statues to past players and memorials to days of glory long gone remind fans that they are walking through, and connecting with, a special space; a space that is still in use and modern whilst simultaneously looking back to the past. It is not hard to see the intense loyalty of long-standing fans who go to Wrigley Field many dozens of times in a season – cheering on their team, commiserating with fellow fans, celebrating a win – but the site also attracts sports fans from across the globe who want to see a game at the second oldest ballpark and sit in the historic bleachers. Attending alongside Cubs fans these fans take in the experience as baseball pilgrims.

In his study of soccer fandom Richard Giulianotti (2002) outlines a taxonomy of spectatorship. Identifying 'supporters, fans, followers, flâneurs' in a descending order of loyalty and connection to the team. The supporter is the most grounded, forming a subcultural identity based on their emotional connection with the team and stadium (p. 33); the fan forms a relationship with the team through affinity with specific players (p. 36); and the follower connects with a team predominantly through the media and achieves a sense of imagined community in virtual space (p. 35). Finally, the flâneur represents the most commoditized and least identified spectator, using media like television and the internet to follow the sport generally, and more than a specific team. Giulianotti sees this type of spectator as defined by the market and the types of access the sporting media provides general audiences (p. 38). However, in travelling to the stadium and passing through the site, I would argue these more casual visitors or pilgrims (Giulianotti's flâneurs) are able to achieve a physical connection to the team, its history, and to whatever draws regular hometown fans (Giulianotti's supporters) to the ballpark. Also, buying merchandise and wearing Cubs hats and shirts allows those pilgrims the opportunity to pass as hometown fans. As they respond to and cheer on the home team they replicate the rituals of Cubs fans that have done the same for generations. The stadium, a site of fan interaction, encourages all those who enter it to partake in the rituals of support. It becomes a temporary home and continues as a shared fan pilgrimage site. Examples of such sites become venerated memorials to popular culture: 'Traditional elite institutions build shrines to symbols of faith, patriotism, and knowledge. But popular shrines communicate the legitimacy of popular experience' (Combs, 1989, p. 74). For Cubs baseball at Wrigley Field, that popular

experience is rooted in the historical significance of the team and the importance of local community.

Wrigley is marketed as the 'Friendly Confines' and its prominence in the North Side Chicago neighbourhood of Wrigleyville underscores that same ideal: it is a familiar place in a homely space. Or, as Yi-Fu Tuan argues, '[w]hen space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place' (Tuan, 1977, p. 73). People live and work in and around the stadium; it is part of the local community and the team is therefore very much part of local identity. As 'a thriving neighbourhood', on gameday Wrigleyville 'turns into one large block party, as residents fill porches, front stoops and curbs for a show' (Solomon, 2013, p. 12). Visitors are given that impression right from the very moment they step out of the CTA Red Line Addison Station: merchandise shops line the street as one approaches, while signs, statues and advertising point the way to the stadium. For Eileen Kennedy and Laura Hills, this type of signposting is an inherent part of sports stadia architecture, sensory stimuli designed specifically to construct visitors as participating fans: 'The copious channels of communication combine to create a complex affective event, evoking sometimes unpredictable emotions, behaviours and meaning' (2009, p. 149). This last point will be particularly important in the contexts of the toxic fan reactions to Steve Bartman I discuss in the next section. However, it is important to note here that Wrigley Field, despite its historic footprint, is like most types of stadia. It was designed to make money by bringing people to the same place to pay to watch sport, as Kennedy and Hills (2009, p. 152) explain: 'Sports stadia represent a space for observing the strategies associated with providing a desirable experience to a large number of consumers and the tactics of those who engage with the space'. In the case of Wrigley Field, 'providing a desirable experience' involves emphasizing the 'friendly' neighbourhood location as well as providing fans the opportunity to buy merchandise and take pictures. The 'tactics' refer to how both regular and new fans use creative consumption to make their visit unique and more authentic (e.g. interacting with players through songs and chants or socializing with friends through discussion and debate). The official Wrigley Field tour book, available to purchase in the various gift shops, stresses that the stadium is an indelible part of the local neighbourhood; it is historic and 'you' become part of that history by visiting. Stepping through the gates makes one part of the extended Cubs fan community, albeit temporarily, and connects one with generations of local fans who have welcomed visitors numerous times before. The book eulogises:

Walking into Wrigley Field for the first time is like getting a great hearty handshake from someone. First impressions are important, but lasting impressions make an impact... All around the Wrigley Field campus there are signs of Wrigley Field's indelibility. Generations of fans are permanently inscribed into the very bricks on which they walk; players are enshrined into the Cubs Walk of Fame in the concourse, and their numbers are retired high atop the left- and rightfield foul poles; the firemen across the street who once

welcomed a young couple to Wrigleyville now happily wave hello to a family of four (Huang, 2009, p. 30).

Sentimentality is a key component of marketing and selling the Cubs experience for both long time and casual fans. For the former, it helps cement the relationship between team, stadium and the local community; and for the latter, it creates a symbolic association with a team based on notions of authenticity, history and place. John Bale makes the point that spaces related to sports create either the love of place (topophilia) or fear of place (topophobia). The visual pleasure associated with being in a beloved space is an important part of topophilia and characterises fans' relationship with Wrigley Field. It is where the team plays, and success and familiarity create an emotional connection beyond the simple joy of watching: 'landscapes of sports possess many elements often rather small features which are taken for granted by those who daily pass them by, which are... icons for the sports fan' (Bale, 1994, p. 135). However, in terms of the Steve Bartman incident and the toxic fan practices displayed during the now infamous championship game, perhaps topophobia is a more appropriate concept through which to understand the fans' relationship to Wrigley Field that night. 'Beloved space' became 'bad space' as the Cubs again lost a crucial game and fans that were knowledgeable of the so-called 'curse' thus saw the stadium as no longer 'friendly' but hostile; a place to be feared. According to Caterina Albano, the fear of a place 'is intrinsically interwoven with modernity' and symbolic 'of an aesthetic preoccupation with space and place as sites of inner projections' (2012, p. 86). Modern buildings, auditoria, and open urban spaces 'serve as the external projection of inner conflicts' (p. 87). Therefore a stadium like Wrigley Field, associated as it is with both the best moments of Cubs history and bad moments such as the 'curse', becomes the exterior site of an internalised fear. This fear stems from anxieties built up over a long period of time by fans that yearn for victory but are keenly aware of how the team has disappointed historically. The relationship between space and the 'curse' highlights the paradoxical nature of place: it can be both a 'good' and 'bad' place at the same time. Because both topophilia and topophobia are associated with personality of place and our attitudes, different experiences in the same space can have an effect and, as a result, a place can change meaning and those who enter it can also change how they perceive it.

For many residents of Chicago, the 'curse' provides an entertaining excuse for the Cubs' continued failures over the past century. Related to a confrontation between a local businessman and stadium staff during a game in 1945, the 'curse' has lingered long in the imagination of fans. William Sianis, owner of the Billy Goat Tavern, brought his pet goat to game four of the World Series against the Detroit Tigers (no doubt attempting to publicise his own establishment) and was asked to leave because other fans were apparently put off by the smell of his goat, Murphy. Allegedly shouting as he was ejected — 'Them Cubs, they ain't gonna win no more!' (in Ferraro and Veneziano, 2007, p. 119) — this moment symbolises a turning point in the fortunes of the club. They did not win the series against Detroit and did not appear in another until 2016, when they finally won it. That this 'curse'

was supposedly made on site enhances the sense of topophobia: the goat was present in the stadium and thus the space is affected (or 'infected') just as much as the team. Sianis is also claimed to have sent team owner Philip K. Wrigley a letter after his ejection stating: 'You are going to lose this World Series and you are never going to win another World Series again. You are never going to win a World Series again because you insulted my goat' (in Selzer, 2014, p. 156). Regardless of the truth of this, or of other parts of the story, repeated tellings are important rituals in the lifespan of the club. They offer some historic, if not colourful, contexts for sports reporters and fans alike to draw from, as they comprehend the repeated poor performances of the team. History and our perception of it impacts on identity and 'awareness of the past is an important element in the love of place' (Tuan, 1974, p. 99). In the case of Wrigley Field, the 'curse' and coping with the Cubs' lack of success, I would argue the opposite is more relevant here: an awareness of the past, specifically the history of the Cubs 'curse', is an integral part of the love of the team, but also a site of anxiety and a fear of the place where they play because of what has happened and 'will' always happen again.

Sports Fans and Toxic Fandom

It is in the contexts of the 'curse' and the Cubs' extended period of having little or no success on the field that we could interpret fan reaction to the Bartman incident and how the fan community continues to view it over a decade later. Perhaps more than any other fandom, sports fandom provokes a high level of identification, whether with the team, its physical location or particular professional athletes. Often, it is place that helps to create increased social connections as regular attendance encourages a sense of loyalty, ownership and community with other fans. In terms of emotional wellbeing and fan satisfaction, sports psychologists, Daniel Wann and Len Zaichkowsky, argue that sports team identification 'has been found to be positively correlated with social life satisfaction, extroversion, social self-esteem, positive affect, and vigor' (2009, p. 492). Those that hold strong team identification in this respect correlate with Richard Giulianotti's description of the 'supporter' in his taxonomy of spectator identities in football: 'The classic supporter has a long-term personal and emotional investment in the club' (2002, p. 33). In terms of the Cubs, I would describe the 'supporter' here as the classic hometown fan I described earlier, who lives and works in the neighbourhood. However, as Wann and Zaichkowsky further discuss in their research, negative affect happens due to a team's lack of success: 'That is, highly identified fans feel threatened by their team's performance. Consequently, they need to develop strategies that assist in their attempts to cope with identity threat' (2009, p. 492). In discussing the Bartman incident and fan coping strategies, the authors outline various ways of coping including citing bias in adjudication, targeting other fans and opposing teams with abuse, and the belief in team curses. Interestingly, protecting fan identity in this case meant a combination of two: deriding Bartman for trying to catch the foul ball; and blaming the 'curse' for his actions that led to the team losing. These 'coping mechanisms' helped fans

ignore the team's actual poor performance while, at the same time, protecting their identity as beleaguered Chicago Cubs fans.

Believing in a 'doomed' team and blaming one particular fan specifically, served to incite toxic fan practices that further entrenched fan identification with the team. The 'curse' is superstition in a sport that is replete with player and fan superstitions, and its longevity through repeated telling serves as a mechanism to help fans cope with continued anxiety related to the Cubs potentially losing or already having lost. This anxiety would also stem from Bartman's actions, which some fans believed at the time helped instigate the team's eventual defeat in the series. Again, the importance of place is noteworthy here as Yi-Fu Tuan argues that superstitions 'are the rules by which a human group attempts to generate an illusion of predictability in an uncertain environment' (1979, p. 9). That environment – the stadium – usually offers a sense of certainty. As I discussed earlier, the 'Friendly Confines' are part of the local community, seen by some fans as a second home. With the home threatened, however, Bartman's actions jeopardized that stability and thus superstition of the 'curse' was activated to help those affected. As a result, Wrigley Field could still remain a welcoming communal space for all fans while Bartman as individual, agent of the 'curse', becomes the literal scapegoat for the team – just as Sianis and his pet Billy goat remain decades later.

Bartman clearly provoked in-group aggression, an evocation of the 'curse' that has caused anxiety and formed part of a Cubs fan identity for decades. Fan reaction to losing the game and aggression displayed toward Bartman as the game got away from the Cubs could be characterised by John Suler's term 'toxic disinhibition' (2004). Even though he applies this idea to those who use the anonymity of the Internet to attack other users (doing something on the web that they would not in the real world), I would argue that the boisterousness of the crowd, the contexts of the emotionally charged game, and the physical environment of the stadium provided fans with anonymity, feeling able to lash out and attack Bartman once he was identified through media coverage and the security detail that escorted him from the stands. This 'toxic disinhibition', Suler argues, 'is simply a blind catharsis, an acting out of unsavoury needs and wishes' (2004). In sporting events we often see this 'acting out' personified by the actions of the football hooligan or in the mob mentality where fans hurl abuse and come to a game prepared for violent confrontation. However, toxic fan reactions are not unique to football. John Hughson discusses violent fan incidents at turn of the century American sporting events such as boxing and relates the 'mob mentality' to how baseball fans were framed in the press as rowdy after an umpire was accidentally killed by a flying soda bottle thrown during a game in 1907 (2009, p. 104). Perhaps contemporary media attention, so often focused on team sports such as football, has helped to conceal how fans of baseball can act and sometimes do act when confronted or threatened by a team's poor performance.

According to sports journalist Justine Gubar, 'the voice of the fan' has become increasingly angry, vitriolic and loud (2015, p. 103). In these wider contexts, we can understand the toxic fan practices directed at Bartman as an excuse to abuse; to take out

frustrations that are built up over decades and rooted in a narrative of superstition and intense loyalty to a team embedded in the local community. Yet, as research into fan behaviour at sporting events suggests, excessive fan identification characterised by dysfunctional behaviour, such as complaining and confronting others, is as much part of the sports fan experience as more positive aspects, such as attendance, team interaction, and consumption of food and merchandise. For Kirk Wakefield and Daniel L. Wann, '[t]he sporting event context gives rise to circumstances where the true nature of the individual quickly rises to the surface' (2006, p. 182). As such, game six of the National League Championship Series, a chance for the Cubs to bury the 'curse' forever by beating the Marlins and move on to the World Series, provided the context for some fans to reveal their true nature. Bartman was their ironic talisman.

The toxic fan practices targeted at Bartman in a space usually reserved for ritual celebration and community identification highlight the paradoxical nature of fandom. All fans attending the game shared in what Etienne Wenger calls a 'community of practice' (1998), something that has happened at the 'Friendly Confines' of Wrigley Field since 1916. However, through an individual act, and the vitriolic reaction to it from many, the 'imaginary community' that Rosemary Hill argues characterises fandom (2014, p. 173) was disrupted. Within fan communities, difference is often not tolerated and 'when an individual's practice does not align with that of others [it] is subsequently relegated' (van de Goor, 2015, p. 281). Therefore we should understand toxic fan practices in the case of Bartman as an outcome of the tension between him being seen as a 'bad' fan (or the physical embodiment of the 'curse') and those who participated in his abuse being 'good' fans (or protecting the team and communal space from a threat). Concepts of place, and the importance of Wrigley Field as communal space for fandom, provide a useful way to understand how Cubs fans have turned a negative place into a positive place. Occupying the physical spot where Bartman tried to catch a foul ball, and inadvertently changing the nature of that all-important game six, becomes a form of sporting pilgrimage. Cubs' fans can safely and playfully re-enact the primal scene devoid of the toxicity that has come to characterize the original event.

Practices of Atonement

For sports fans, being there in person to watch their team play is an important part of their fan identity. As I discussed earlier, the idea of the local community – Wrigley Field within the neighbourhood – is an important part of being a Chicago Cubs fan. The allusion to the religious pilgrimage can clearly be made; both Matt Hills (2002) and Roger Aden (1999) ascribe some of the language of religious ritual and pilgrimage to the practices of fans that must touch or be on the spot where their favourite character/actor once stood. Will Brooker emphasizes the importance of being there (2007a) – having a place to go to and feel at home – as well as the 'symbolic pilgrimage' that fans take when they don't travel but interact from their living room through television (2007b). Similarly, as Cornel Sandvoss asserts, '[t]he physical places of fandom clearly have an extraordinary importance for fans' (2005, p. 61). The popularity of live events like a baseball game is founded on the immediacy

of connection to the event (something different could happen every time) and also the fact they have some inherent cultural value that fans (whether they attended or not) consider important:

Another dimension to the question of why people continue to attend live events in our mediatized culture is that live events have cultural value: being able to say that you were physically present at a particular event constitutes valuable symbolic capital (Auslander, 1999, p. 57).

Again, Giulianotti's work on the types of football fan is helpful here to understand the relationship between supporters (the most devoted type of fan in his taxonomy) and the spaces in which they watch and celebrate their teams. He describes their 'topophilic' relationship with the home ground, knowing it at a personal level and enhanced by memories of attending over a number of years and special moments:

The ground enhances their thick solidarity with fellow supporters, crowds of whom generate an atmosphere on match days that is considered to be special or unique... Supporting the club is a lived experience, rooted in a grounded identity that is reflected in an affectionate relationship to the ground that is regularly revisited (Giulianotti, 2002, p. 33).

As I have argued, Wrigley Field is not only a familiar space for local fans; it provides a romanticised focus for fans of baseball more widely because of its age, the 'Friendly Confines' tag, and the mythology of the team's 'doomed' identity. The space becomes a totem for the surrounding local community, home for the core group of 'supporters' and 'fans', and a mythical space for the more general baseball enthusiasts, described as 'followers' and 'flâneurs' by Giulianotti.

What goes on in this space makes it unique, whether it is the toxic fan reaction to Bartman, the Cubs' loss in the series, or the continued emphasis on the 'curse' by fans trying to rationalise such traumatic events. 'Every stadium event is a historical experience,' state Chris Gaffney and John Bale, and fans that gather there participate in documenting that experience through the purchasing of memorabilia and programmes during a game and engaging with media coverage after it has finished (2004, p. 34). As well as sensing the space through site (seeing the stadium on approach), sound (hearing the cheers and songs), touch (feeling the seats and stands), scent (smelling the grass and pine tar), and taste (savouring the food and beverages), Gaffney and Bale argue that fans are able to sense the stadium through history and crowd belonging. Therefore, Wrigley Field contains historic memories (both good and bad) and, as a result, the physical environment takes on extra special significance for fans:

To a large extent the collective energies, dreams, and aspirations of large segments of the population are posited and deposited at the same time. Although the individual events may be trivial (one baseball game out of 162 in a season), it is the collected history of place that implies a much deeper and specific meaning for thousands upon thousands of individuals (p. 35).

In terms of the toxic reaction to Steve Bartman, the event became part of the collective and historical experience of the ballpark. Just as some aggressive fans felt energised enough to take out their frustrations on an individual, others considered this unacceptable – certainly the documentary *Catching Hell* attempted to show that most Cubs fans and journalists who were there thought Bartman's treatment was unfair. Wrigley Field as shared fan space thus continued to offer different sensory experiences that resonate historically and collectively: 'The stadium is a unique container of collective emotion and energy which produces experiences that are as varied and complex as the individuals who periodically visit them' (Gaffney and Bale, 2004, p. 37).

However, building on the sensory experience of the stadium, I would argue that it is not simply about a sense of belonging, or being at the stadium for historical events, that counts. What fans do or how they act in the sacred stadium space seems to make the experience unique and affectively valuable. This is particularly important for those fans that were present for the Bartman game or witnessed live through television. Atoning for the toxic fan behaviour described in the previous section is done through practices of occupying the 'cursed' space. Most sites of pilgrimage are 'multiply coded' (Brooker, 2007a, p. 430), and thus fandom connected to place differs for each fan. Locations that inspire fan pilgrimage have real world uses; that is, they are not just used or visited by fans, therefore they have to actively make these places special – either through physical transformation of the space (adding familiar objects) or performance in that space (costume and cosplay). According to Brooker, fan pilgrimage is about pretending, performance and making the new from 'the familiar and quotidian', and so fans travelling to a filming location or site of special interest are, borrowing Brooker's phrase, 'approaching the location with their own agenda' and 'are able to transform "flatscape" into a place of wonder. They bring their own urban imaginary, their own maps of fiction and their own angles on the everyday' (Brooker, 2007a, p. 443). The stadium landscape is composed of various physical markers (e.g. signs, advertising, images of team and players, monuments to past successes) and, in Wrigley Field, those markers take on historical significance because they have been in the same space for over a century. With such a historic ballpark, Cubs fans have not only built up a sense of belonging to one place they have also grown to feel a sense of ownership of the things that occupy that space. Connecting with those special objects on gameday – touching, posing with and photographing them – becomes part of the ritual of being a Cubs fan.

For Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins, 'objects have symbolic functions, embodying and representing our gods and spirits, averting demons and encapsulating memory', but

they also ‘have social meanings’. These meanings can be used to ‘assert status or power, circulate value, demarcate our habitats and habits... as well as to connect us to and disconnect us from friends, colleagues or strangers’ (2009, p. 1). The things that we continue to hold dear are evocative and thus serve to bring together ideas of thought and feeling. For Sherry Turkle (2007a), ‘evocative objects’ act as ‘companions to our emotional lives’ and ‘provocations to thought’ (5). They mean something as a link to the past and an object in the present, so ‘the meaning of such objects shifts with time, place, and differences among individuals’ (2007b, p. 307). Playing with these objects (touching, holding, filming, remaking, displaying and collecting) ‘engages the heart as well as the mind; it is a source of inner vitality’ (2007b, p. 309). The seat from where Bartman tried to catch the now infamous foul ball has become an evocative object; not conspicuous in any way, its location is well known by die-hard fans and attracts occasional fans in reasonable measure: Seat 113, Row 8, Aisle 4. On any given gameday it is normal to see fans of all types go up to the seat, photograph it, and even pose in the space as if they were Bartman reaching out over the wall to catch the ball. Such performance forms part of the ritual of fan pilgrimage — photography and recording one’s presence in that space is about preserving it in fan memory and recreating what took place there. For Matt Hills, travelling to mediated spaces, taking a picture, posing for it, is evidence of fan attempts at generating a tangible experience of the previously intangible: ‘[m]ediated image of a diegetic space which is materially restaged and re-mediated by the cult fan’ (2002, p. 115). Where taking photos for tourists is about cataloguing the journey, fan photography in spaces that mean something beyond their original intent is about making the experience more real.

Bartman’s seat has become a focal point for Cubs fans, a monument that symbolises the ‘curse’ in physical form. In discussing the ‘curse’ and its significance, I have already related space and history to notions of belonging and identifying as a fan. The way in which visitors to the ballpark move about and seek out Bartman’s seat illustrates the affective nature of place and the importance of objects. Occupying that seat, recording the experience through photography and re-enacting the incident, becomes like a cathartic ritual for those fans affected by the toxic fan practices it provoked. Arjun Appadurai contends that ‘human actors encode things with significance’ and ‘it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context’ (1986, p.5). Objects from history ‘accumulate meanings as time passes’ but are also ‘active and passive’ in meaning making as the viewer/owner learns more about them and observes them in a continued state of preservation and display (Pearce, 1994, p. 19). Christopher Pinney sees the socialization of objects as an inevitable outcome of prioritizing the subject and the social. Objects ‘can only ricochet between the essentialized autonomous object and the dematerialized space of things whose only graspable qualities are their ‘biographies’ and ‘social lives’’ (Pinney, 2000, p. 259). During game six of the 2016 National League Championship Series (the same stage in 2003 when the Bartman incident occurred) between the Cubs and Los Angeles Dodgers, the seat again attracted media attention. The lucky fan that occupied it was interviewed before and during the game on both local and national television, asked how it felt to sit

there and how important this game was to Cubs fans that had not seen the team progress further than this for decades. Therefore, the seat still held significant meaning for the media and fan community as it was very active in creating more news and more context for the live sporting event – even if by then the toxic fan reaction to Bartman had been erased from popular memory. As *Catching Hell* points out, the city was still coming to terms with that historic loss and struggling to atone for the ways in which so many fans treated him.

Being in that toxic space has become part of the historic sense of belonging created when visiting Wrigley Field and is one of the many sporting rituals that enhance the fan experience. As with media fandom, where ‘different objects become a means for people to enact fantasy, to panoptically display themselves’ (Lancaster, 1996, p. 32), occupying Bartman’s seat either to pose for a picture or to watch a game puts the fan in a unique position, retroactively connecting them to the toxic event of 2003 and the ‘curse’ that has informed such emotional behaviour since 1945. I would argue that such acts of posing, performing and taking pictures in that space are examples of ‘proactive pessimism’, a defensive strategy which has been ‘found among persons who become more pessimistic about an upcoming event as the event draws closer’ (Wann and Grieve, 2008, p. 79). Done before a game, especially the equivalent game in 2016, visiting the same space where Bartman made such an impactful and indelible mark on Cubs history allows for atonement: fans can change history and perhaps reverse ‘the curse’. The narrative of Cubs baseball up until they did eventually get to the World Series — and win it — has always been about losing and the effects of what happened in 1945. Proactive pessimism as embodied in fans interacting with and touching Bartman’s seat serves as a means ‘to cope with the threat of a potentially poor performance by their team’ (84). In the contexts of the Cubs trying to reach their first World Series since 1908, the media and fan attention paid to where Bartman sat was an example of how proactive pessimism was employed because of the increased anxiety over the other game six being played at Wrigley Field – win it and perhaps the ‘curse’ would be broken. Pilgrimage, performance and occupying the evocative object of Bartman’s seat are enmeshed together as practices of atonement. These practices are the physical means through which the original toxic fan practices that previously characterized that space can be forgotten.

Conclusion

On July 31 2017, Steve Bartman was invited to the head office at Wrigley Field where he would be presented with his own World Series ring. As a symbol of Cubs championship success, this was an important gesture to make on behalf of the organization: it seemed to represent an attempt to ask Bartman for forgiveness as well as to finally put the ‘curse’ to rest. A statement read:

We hope this provides closure on an unfortunate chapter of the story that has perpetuated throughout our quest to win a long-awaited World Series. While no gesture can fully lift the public burden he has endured for more than a

decade, we felt it was important Steve knows he has been and continues to be fully embraced by this organization (in Unruh, 2017).

As I have argued throughout this piece, a history of disappointment and loss has formed part of a Cubs' fan identity. Wrigley Field as focal point for this identity takes on special significance because of its place in the local community and its physical presence as a sports stadium; the objects contained within (including Bartman's seat) become emblems of belonging and community, whether good or bad. When Bartman received his ring, it also became a symbol for all that had happened before: the 'curse', the toxic fan reaction, the years of frustration and the one joyous moment of recent Cubs success. Bartman's statement following the private ceremony highlights the importance of place, objects and history for fans:

I am fully aware of the significance and appreciate the symbolism the ring represents on multiple levels... I humbly receive the ring not only as a symbol of one of the most historic achievements in sports, but as an important reminder for how we should treat each other in today's society. My hope is that we all can learn from my experience to view sports as entertainment and prevent harsh scapegoating, and to challenge the media and opportunistic profiteers to conduct business ethically by respecting personal privacy rights and not exploit any individual to advance their own self-interest or economic gain. Moreover, I am hopeful this ring gesture will be the start of an important healing and reconciliation process for all involved (in Unruh, 2017).

The toxic fan practices discussed in this piece certainly contradict the public ideal of the 'Friendly Confines' promoted by the Chicago Cubs, but through an analysis of how fans reacted to Bartman, how they use the stadium as cathartic space and invoke negative associations with the 'curse' to protect a sense of identity, I would argue that toxicity is an inevitable aspect of being a fan. Fans change the meaning of places and spaces by travelling to and occupying them. The physical experience of being there and participating in practices of atonement such as performance and pilgrimage unique to those spaces – even extreme ones as seen with Bartman – are important actions that affirm the idea that fandom is an affective state of being but is also characterized by a diverse community of practices.

***Coda:** The ball Bartman failed to catch was found, auctioned off and bought by Cubs fan and owner of the Harry Caray restaurant group Grant DePorter. In a 2004 ceremony to help break the 'curse', he fed it a last meal and blew it up in front of the local and national press. The remains were used a year later to make a sauce for a special 'Foul Ball Spaghetti' sold to diners at his popular restaurant. The Billy Goat Tavern, a very popular local and tourist haunt, now proudly advertises on its website that the 'curse' is broken thanks to the 2016 World Series win.

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