

From Birmingham, with Love: Understanding Personal and Professional Performances during Ethnographic Fieldwork

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This autoethnographic essay revisits and examines my experiences with the pride of the English Midlands, Birmingham's Aston Villa Football Club. As an American scholar embarking on a new field of study, I conducted extensive ethnographic research with the team and fans while simultaneously falling in love: with the Villa, with Birmingham, and with a rival team's supporter. Using key matches as markers to examine the trajectory of these love affairs, I explore my experience balancing my roles—and performances—as researcher and fan over almost a decade of Villa fandom, a time period characterized by tremendous change both in my life and the team's fortunes. This reflective examination also allows me a fairly unique opportunity as a scholar: to utilize a theory developed in part through this research—although crystallized years later—to explore my performances within the lens of Performative Sport Fandom's modes of Knowing and Caring (Osborne & Coombs 2016).

This is a love story.

It didn't start that way. This essay started as a pure scholarly reflection on being an out-of-country fan for a soccer team across an ocean; an academic exercise to better examine and explore the experiences that informed my colleague and I as we conceptualized and developed a new theoretical approach to understanding fandom. As I wrote, however, I realized that this trajectory only makes sense within the context of the beginning: my Villa origin story, if you will.

As I read through old field notes and sorted through photos and match day programs, emotions kept getting the better of me. I get lost in my memories, missing my friends, my flat, my life in Birmingham, and my daily involvement with my beloved Aston Villa Football Club in a way that felt more visceral and

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potent than I would ever have expected. The more I reflected on the time I spent actively engaged in field research, the more I realized how clearly and explicitly my current life is rooted in my experience with Aston Villa. After all, it was through this research that I met my now-husband, and thus my family exists because of a ‘meet cute’ in a Birmingham pub the night before a Villa match. My time as an in-person Villa fan and scholar marks one of the happiest periods of my life, and I keenly feel the loss of it whenever I think too much about my team.

My emotional reaction to the elicitation of these memories overwhelmed me at times. Rather than struggling to write, I felt compelled to put those down on paper, creating a permanent, public record of my ongoing love affair with Aston Villa and, by extension, Birmingham. This is part and parcel of the experience of autoethnography, which “needs the researcher to be vulnerable and intimate” (Ellis and Bochner 2006, 433), allowing me to reflect on the mundane, day-to-day (Silverman 2007) life of a scholar and fan. Rather than looking for the exceptional, this piece explores my lived experience, “giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding” (Wall 2008).

The experience of writing autoethnography was new to me, yet this story—my story, my husband’s story, and the stories of my Birmingham-based Villa family—called for a methodological approach that could embrace, reflect, and celebrate the personal and evocative nature of these stories. The narrative emphasis of autoethnography allows me to focus on and honor “the emotional and scientific commitment of a triumvirate: author, story, and reader” (Ettorre 2005, 536). Recognizing that these stories are not just mine to tell, I followed the advice of other scholars to avoid writing as if my family and friends—the other ‘characters’ in my narrative—will never see what I have published; instead, I have imagined us with this manuscript in a pub, reading my recounting of memories together (Medford 2006; Tolich 2010) in order to ensure I “treat all persons mentioned in the text as vulnerable, including the researcher” (Tolich 2010, 1605). I write to find harmony in our voices (Johnston and Strong 2008), telling our story with respect and fairness using a narrative style that makes “fields of knowledge accessible to everybody” (Ellis et al. 2008, 265). To honor our story, I needed to ensure that all of my co-participants can read, reflect, and remember our shared experiences.

In the beginning...

Reflecting on what drew me to Villa in 2007 as both a scholar and a fan is particularly important because, as I write this piece in the midst of the 2016-2017 football season, my team is not part of the Premier League for the very first time. Finally relegated after years of flirting with the bottom three, I now have to follow Championship League news to find out about my Villa. Fans are angry and disappointed, and much of their rage is directed at the American they hold

responsible for their decline and demotion: former owner Randy Lerner. Right now, being a Villa fan makes you the object of pity; our once-great team has been brought to its knees, and the woeful pitch performances are met with resounding silence from those in charge.

This is a wholly different experience than when I came on board in 2007. When I started following the Villa, then-new owner Lerner and manager (Martin O'Neill) had engendered widespread enthusiasm among the faithful. A team with a storied history and high ambitions—a 'proud history, bright future' as the scarves left on every seat at the last match of Lerner's first season declared—Aston Villa's fans exhibited belief that this was it. This was their time to take their rightful place at the top of the table. The future looked brilliant, and I couldn't wait to take my first trip to Birmingham to experience the Villa in person.

November 11, 2007. Aston Villa 2-1 Birmingham City

Exhausted but riding high on adrenaline, I am in a cab heading from Birmingham International Airport to my hotel in Brindleyplace, a bustling hub in central Brum. This is my first trip to Birmingham, and I am anxious. I've never traveled internationally by myself before, nor have I ever been abroad explicitly for research, so this trip is full of new challenges—or, as I keep reminding myself—adventures. I've developed some friendships on a Villa supporters Internet board I frequent—in fact, that's in large part what motivated me to take this trip—but I don't actually know anyone in this city. I don't want to think too much about what could go wrong.

I am still quite early in my Villa fandom and, correspondingly, my research agenda. After falling in love with international soccer during the 2006 World Cup, I was looking for a Premier League team to support to keep my interest going and have an avenue—a reason, if you will—to keep learning about the sport. While poking around on the Cleveland Browns' website (my birthright team and the bane of my existence), I find that owner Randy Lerner had taken over a Premier League side. Perfect. The site pointed me to a Villa 'superfan,' Jonathan Fear, as the main point of contact. Fear, as he would come to be known, had introduced me to his supporters' site, Vital Villa. I had spent a considerable amount of time on this site as I learned about the team, and I was hooked. Driving into Brum, I am 'well-chuffed' (as my British friends might say) to recognize St. Andrews—and to refer to it as 'the Sty,' in the tradition of Villa fans everywhere. I began to believe that I could really do this—I could really, credibly talk shop (or at least not humiliate myself). As I had already learned, expectations were low for women and Americans, so it wasn't exactly a high bar to reach.

As we made our way toward my hotel, the driver and I chat about the Villa and my research. I'm still working out exactly what I want to do, but I know I am fascinated by the experience Lerner had during his takeover. Unlike the new (and terribly unpopular) 'Yank' owners at Liverpool and Manchester United, Lerner had been welcomed at the Villa. I wanted to understand why. Why did it work in this situation, but not others? What made this case different? My trip over Veteran's Day weekend was my first in-person foray into exploring those questions.

The match that weekend was being held at St. Andrews, and I knew enough to know that I probably would not have the best experience there as a single, American woman who was still learning about the sport and the culture. Luckily, Villa was hosting fans to watch the match at various hospitality places around Villa Park, and my contacts at the club had invited me to attend. A steward walks me to one of the main viewing areas, my heart beating faster as I tread through back hallways that feel like sacred ground. For a fairly new fan, I know I am falling hard, fast. I keep reminding myself I have to stay aware of my fandom—maintain the reflexivity required of me as a qualitative researcher—but in this moment, I know I am in for the long haul. Just a few steps into our home stadium, and I know I am Villa till I die.

My Villa escort makes sure I am comfortably seated in one of the viewing areas, before taking off to focus on other game-day duties. I look around, slightly terrified and trying my damndest to maintain a brave face. This is what I want to do—there is no question about that—but it is more than a little overwhelming to be in this room. It is packed to the rafters with the Villa faithful, mostly white men wearing some variation of a claret and blue Villa team shirt. I look around to see if I recognize anyone from the occasional photo thread on Vital, but quickly realize I don't have the guts to go say hi anyway. I order a pint to blend in (this was well before I learned that women often ask for a half or a glass of wine... so many things to learn!) and make myself at home. I have a small notebook tucked in my pocket to take notes, but spend most of the time just... watching. Absorbing. Learning.

The match is almost over and the tension of the ongoing draw is almost unbearable. Suddenly, the room explodes. Local hero Gabriel Agbonlahor has scored against 'the Scum' (as Birmingham City is often known among Villa fans) to pull the good guys ahead. I am swept up in the revelry, hugging and high-fiving with the best of them. This is it. This is what I want, both as a researcher and, well, as a human. This is what I crave to understand, to be part of. Just minutes later, the

whistle blows. Villa have won their most important derby match, defeating their cross-town archrivals in what felt like the best way possible.

Little did I know at the time that this trip would be the start of a new era, reshaping me both professionally and personally. Finding an intellectual home in the world of sport fandom research was an unexpected pleasure. Previous research had demonstrated that British sport fans are highly identified with their football teams (Parry, Jones, and Wann 2014), so I knew this had the potential to be a fascinating study with deeply committed fans. I wanted to be part of the movement away from “the tendency for the majority of [fan studies] to focus on macro top-down social processes or meta-narratives, which tend to overlook the everyday experiences of sports fans” (Crawford 2004 157).

I had only been in my first academic job for a couple months when I flew out to Birmingham, and I was still formulating what this research agenda would look like. I had worked in consumer insights research for a number of years while procrastinating and postponing the completion of my doctoral dissertation, so I was comfortable with methods, but translating those skills into an academic work was intimidating. As I reflect on my experiences, I can’t help but remember the intellectual uncertainty around all of this: Could I make the shift from applied research to academic? Would I be a sport fan or a sport spectator (Wann 1995, 1997)—and would it matter to my research? What if I didn’t get anything meaningful or useful out of this? How could I make sure that my research would be important, at least to me and other sports fans?

Reflecting and remembering: Using autoethnography

Debate between analytic and evocative or creative analytic practices forms of autoethnography are outside the scope of this paper (see Anderson 2006a, 2006b; Ellis and Bochner 2006), particularly since my process while preparing to write this paper referenced both; like Forde, I find myself somewhere in the middle (Forde 2015). As Anderson writes in his response to Ellis and Bochner’s critique of his essay on analytic autoethnography, “Autoethnography, whether evocative or analytic, offers one of the best opportunities and warrants for a visible author” (2006b, 454). This concept of a visible author—claiming my stories and (re-)presenting them in a narrative form meant to “mean something to our readers... to attract, awaken, and arouse them, inviting readers into conversation with the incidents, feelings, contingencies, contradictions, memories, and desires that our research stories depict” (Bochner 2012, 158).

My desire to share these stories to “spark possibilities for reflection and transformation in readers” (Berry and Patti 2015, 265) is coupled with a recognition that these experiences—these narratives—hold the kernels of what would become Performative Sport Fandom (PSF), a retheorization of sport

fandom that my colleague Anne Cunningham Osborne and I developed based on our work with both British Premier League and American National Football League fans (see Osborne and Coombs 2013, 2016). Ultimately, I want to ensure that my analysis and story work together (Ellis and Bochner 2006, 444), contributing “to a spiraling refinement, elaboration, extension, and revision of theoretical understanding” (Anderson 2006a, 388). This piece provides a unique space in which to trace my own performances as a “scholar-fan” (Sturm 2015) through the lens of PSF, a theorization of fandom that is grounded in those very same experiences. It also allows me to add my voice to Kerwin and Hoerber’s (2015) call to potentially inspire more female academics “who remain in the ‘sport fan closet’...and who might feel more comfortable if they knew that other women wanted to make their sport fan identities visible” (507).

PSF posits that “individuals become sports fans through the performance of fandom... Furthermore, fan identity interacts in interesting and important ways with other identities such as gender, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic class and nationality” (Osborne and Coombs 2013, 677). As a white, female, American scholar and fan, my performances were deeply informed and influenced by those around me: primarily white, male, British fans who had been brought up in the Villa tradition, rather than coming to it as adults. I had to constantly and consciously balance my performances as ‘fan’ with my role—and performance—as ‘scholar,’ exercising caution and reflexivity while in the field and during analysis and writing. As expressed so wonderfully by Learmonth and Humphreys (2012), this often led to ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ moments as I shifted between ‘fan’ and ‘scholar’ roles, often within the space of a few seconds. Unsurprisingly, my performances were not constant; as PSF tells us, fan performances are relational, contextual, and negotiable, and thus continually shifted as my research continued.

Our research uncovered two modes that help explain fan performance: Knowing and Caring, since “fans construct fandom through the complex interplay between how much you know about your team and how much you care about its success” (Osborne and Coombs 2016, 23). In late 2007, I was a novice football fan, and I was deeply conscious of both being an American and a woman (neither of which were common in Villa Park that day). It was impossible to block out the fact that I was foreign in every sense of the word, and I was terrified that I would be called out as an imposter. I was too aware that Knowing—having some level of expertise about the team and the game—was essential to being perceived and accepted as a credible researcher in this area. To prepare for this trip, I had worked incredibly hard to be as high on the Knowing axis as I could be as someone fairly new to the game. While I had learned all that I could on paper, there were some things I couldn’t figure out just by reading: how to correctly pronounce ‘Agbonlahor,’ for example, or how to decipher words during slightly drunken, Brummie-accented fan sing-alongs. My fear of being ‘caught out’ as someone less than expert ran the risk of paralyzing me, and that fear drove an

almost compulsive effort to learn as much as possible about Aston Villa, the Premier League, and the game itself.

What I couldn't prepare for, however, was how quickly I would move into a 'high Caring' performance. I started the match quiet and uncomfortable, trying to blend into the woodwork, believing that I was at risk of being seen as a fool (or worse, being recognized as an imposter) if I reacted inappropriately during the match. When Gabby scored his goal, however, I could no longer contain my enthusiasm. I was living proof of Wann's 2006 finding that there are real, tangible benefits to fandom in terms of increased social interaction; instead of sitting quietly—and alone—during the match, I was right in the mix of the Villa faithful, sharing in their joyful celebrations. My Caring performance was organic, inspired by both the play on the field and the reaction in the viewing room. It was no longer possible to contain my enthusiasm or constrain my performance; the palpable excitement—and the sense of community among the Villa fans present—easily overrode my fears and resistance.

During this period, I recognized that it would be a delicate balance to negotiate my performances as both a fan and a researcher, particularly in terms of my gender. After all, "it is assumed a man is a sport fan unless he says he is not. A woman is assumed to not be a sport fan, until she proves she is one" (Hoerber and Kerwin 2013, 328). My time on Villa-focused fan message boards also had made clear that, at that point in time, women were automatically suspected of being interested in football in order to 'meet a man.' Women on the boards were accused of being 'on the pull,' and after learning that I had quickly created a new account with a gender-neutral name. In person, however, that wasn't possible. I knew that women sports fans often were perceived as "inauthentic,' not 'dedicated' in their support, and...more interested in the sexual attractiveness of the players rather than the sport itself." (Crawford and Gosling 2004, 479) And it wasn't just British footie fans I feared would perceive my interest as being driven by a hidden desire to meet a man. I was still new to my job, and I knew it would be all too easy for my colleagues to dismiss my research agenda as one lacking in rigor, and instead perceive it as an international boondoggle that was little more than a chance to watch sports, drink beer, and hook up. These fears were thrown into relief when I did the unthinkable: fell in love with a life-long Tottenham Hotspur fan.

January 1, 2008. Aston Villa 2-1 Tottenham Hotspur

Still slightly hung over from our New Year's Eve celebration, Annie and I take our seats in the legendary Holte End at Villa Park. Our faces are barely visible behind our Villa scarves, and our clapping hands are muffled by our brand-new claret and blue gloves that only come off to send text messages to our Villa friends and the cute Tottenham Hotspur fan I met the night before. I make sure I don't talk about

this new guy—Lindsey—in front of our Villa friends. I need to be taken seriously as a researcher and fan, and I am deeply conscious that one of the first things we learned on the Villa boards is that there is an automatic suspicion that women who like football are only pretending in an effort to meet a guy. I didn't want to be the cliché, and I didn't want to undermine our research at this early stage. That said, the guy was really cute, and I didn't want to just cut that off either. After all, he is a passionate football fan and incredibly knowledgeable about the sport, so why burn a potential resource... right?

We laugh as Villa fans taunt the Spurs' goalkeeper, Paul Robinson, drawing out the 'you' in 'You fat bastard!' each time he takes a goal kick. After a few of these outbursts, Robinson reached behind to jiggle his posterior at the crowd, inspiring gales of laughter at his good-natured response to the ribbing. This is a wonderful introduction to the friendly banter that is part and parcel of English football. We have yet to see the aggressive side, although we were certain we would at future matches, but we love every second among the Villa faithful.

This was Annie's and my first trip to Birmingham together, and we were in agreement that this research agenda showed huge amounts of promise. After arriving in London on Boxing Day, we had traveled to Brum to join up with other Villa fans for a trip to Wigan, my first in-person Premier League match. In true British tradition, the weather had not cooperated, so after a long afternoon spent in cold, driving British rain we spent the next couple days laid up in our hotel room, the smell of mentholated rubs permeating all of our clothes. We had decided to put on brave faces and go out for New Year's Eve, eventually making our way to a pub called the Tap and Spile on the canals in central Brum. We found a table in the front room with the bar, and I noticed an attractive man sitting with a couple across the way. When the DJ asked them to move so he could set up for the night, they came over to the empty table next to us. We immediately struck up a conversation about football. I was disappointed to learn that the handsome, single guy was a Tottenham Hotspur fan, but since we were all attending the match the next day at Villa Park, this gave us a clear opportunity to banter. We exchanged numbers, and I spent much of the next day texting back and forth with him. Within a week, we were together. As I was packing for my flight home in mid-January, Lindsey—my newly minted Australian-born, London-bred, Spurs-loving boyfriend—took me to a local Waterstone's bookstore to get reading material for the plane. Football and books? I was hooked.

As our relationship developed over the next year, I found myself struggling to balance my performances as a researcher and football fan with my newfound status as a 'better half,' to use the quintessentially British turn of phrase I found so endearing. I didn't want to be distracted from my research, and I was falling

more and more in love with the Villa—and Birmingham—during each visit. My job at Kent State came with a healthy research start-up package, which when combined with my own personal savings meant I could travel to England on a regular basis. For the next year, I traveled at least once (and sometimes twice) a month, arriving early Thursday morning and spending Thursday and Friday doing interviews and attending press conferences at Villa Park and Bodymoor Heath, Villa's training ground, before attending the weekend's match. During this time, I became "part of the scenery" (Coombs and Osborne 2018, 248). During the summer months, I moved there full-time, getting a flat in central Birmingham with Lindsey. My regular presence meant I got to know journalists as well as the club employees, and I spent countless hours watching, listening, and asking as many questions as I could. I also developed close, long-lasting friendships with other Villa fans. At this point, Birmingham was my second home. I saw these friends more than I saw many of my lifelong friends in Ohio. My world revolved around the Villa and Birmingham.

I no longer worried about the authenticity of my performances. I was as high on the Knowing axis as I had ever been for any sports team in my life. I considered it a point of honor that I could impress any taxi driver in Brum with my Villa knowledge, and I took advantage of every possible opportunity to talk Villa with anyone who would listen. My time was spent at Villa Park, Bodymoor Heath, and in pubs, where I "[sought] to investigate the lived experience of football fans" (Dixon 2014, 382). I was an unabashed Villaphile, and I was conscious of being in a best-case-scenario as both a researcher and a fan: I was getting unbelievably good data and had almost unparalleled access to a top-flight sports organization, coupled with a fantastic life that I had built with people I truly loved.

Even when I was back in Ohio for the school year, I still maintained a real, meaningful, wonderful life that was centered in Brum. I truly loved this city—the people, the architecture, the canals, and the feeling that I am experiencing a more authentic, lived life in England than most Americans could ever imagine. While Lindsey and I traveled to London and the Isle of Wight fairly often to see his family, Birmingham had captured my heart. The city isn't on the usual British Isles touring itinerary, which I considered to be a disservice to my beloved Brummagem and the tourists who miss out on this wonderful, messy, glorious place. I considered myself to be a Brummie more than I ever was a New Yorker or Louisianan, even though I had lived in those places for longer periods of time. I loved—*loved*—being in Brum, and while there I developed relationships that are among the most precious in my life.

November 29, 2008. Aston Villa 0-0 Fulham

For this particular match, Lindsey and I meet up with friends at the Addies, our affectionate nickname for the Adventurers, a local pub frequented by Villa fans. We

huddle together to warm up after a cold game, debriefing the match while trying to figure out our plans for the evening. Our group is mostly made up of drinkers from the Villa fan boards I frequent, although I am pleased that two of my favorites—the teenage daughters of a Villa fan—were out and about with their dad and thus part of our group. We decide to make our way to the German Christmas Market in central Brum, just outside of Lindsey’s and my flat. I am wearing a pink Villa beanie hat, one of the many pieces of AVFC-branded outwear I had acquired over the past year. As we try to make our way through the packed crowds in the Christmas market, the pink hat becomes our identifier. One of our crowd—Don, I think? Or maybe Jim?—started the effort, holding the hat in the air as a beacon for us to follow. While we are drinking, our revelry is not borne of the booze; it is a night full of friends, fellowship, and joy. We are the Pink Hat Brigade, and we are having the time of our lives.

I can’t believe how lucky I am to know these people and have this life, a life I never imagined when I started this research project just over a year ago. I know Lindsey’s visa to move to the States will likely be approved soon (and, perhaps more importantly, my start-up package is running out), and with that I won’t be coming to see my friends, my team, and my beloved Birmingham as often. Fighting off the tinge of sadness that comes with that recognition, I instead focus on the celebration at hand.

After a year of actively researching the Villa, I knew that my time was coming to an end. My research was wrapping up—we were reaching redundancy across the various areas of interest and logistically my resources were depleted. While I had known all along that this life couldn’t last forever, I was having a hard time letting go. My performances were those of an insider—an expert—someone who clearly was Villa through and through. I had spent a year immersed in my study of not just the fans and their performances, but also the owner (Osborne and Coombs 2009), the team (Coombs and Osborne 2012a), and the journalists who covered Premier League football (Coombs and Osborne 2012b). As a result of the depth and breadth of these investigations, I was high in both Caring and Knowing. I clearly was committed to the Villa, and the friendships I had developed were both deep and lasting.

Even years later, as I write about this night, I am blinking away tears. This is one of my all-time favorite days (and nights) of my life. The Pink Hat Brigade has now gone our separate ways—the girls have grown up, the younger guys have children and thus cut back on their revelry, Lindsey and I live in the States and have children of our own—but damn, that night was just the best.

May 9, 2009. Fulham 3-1 Aston Villa

It's Lindsey's and my wedding day! We are getting married in Akron, Ohio, and the closest of our Villa family—Fear, Deano, Don and his family, Mark and Debs, and my partner in crime, Annie, and her husband, Chip—have come to celebrate. I like to point out the dearth of Spurs fans to my almost-husband, using this as further evidence that Villa supporters are vastly superior to the fans of that London side. All of the bridesmaids in our wedding are wearing claret and blue Aston Villa scarves; the groomsmen (and best woman, Lindsey's closest friend from university, the lovely Louise) are bedecked in Tottenham navy and white. Our wedding favors are cookie jars with our names, the date of our wedding, and the badges for each team. We joke about this being a 'mixed marriage,' although I find it slightly less funny as the Spuds keep getting better and Villa keep falling just a wee bit short of where we need to be.

As the bridesmaids and I are getting ready, I routinely check the scores, hoping Villa can pull off a win as a much-desired wedding gift. Sadly, it is not to be. My Villa family and I commiserate at the reception, agreeing that we would put on brave faces nonetheless. The open bar helps.

I am so thrilled that these friends are here to celebrate with Lindsey and me. Our relationship is closely tied to the Villa and to Birmingham, and we both are really missing Brum. While we have a wonderful life in the States and it absolutely makes perfect sense for us to live here, I can't believe how much I miss Birmingham and Aston Villa. It hurts sometimes, thinking about how much joy our lives had there. I know letting go and moving on is part of growing up, but God, I miss it.

Having our Villa friends at our wedding was incredibly important to Lindsey and me. These were the men and women who completed our lives in Brum, and we knew we needed them there for our celebration. Fear, Deano, Mark and Debs, Don and his family... They were there for us as we fell in love, and one of my favorite parts of our wedding day was having them with us Stateside to share in our celebration.

By now, I hadn't been to Villa Park for months—for the first time in my Villa fandom, I was physically separated from the side (and our Birmingham family) for an extended period of time. I noticed my experience being away was different than Lindsey's. He managed to keep close emotional ties to Tottenham Hotspur, and he spent considerable time following his team both on match days and throughout the week; despite the distance, his Knowing and Caring performances remained high.

While I still loved the Villa and wanted to stay involved, I was finding it difficult. I was writing about the team and our research findings, an essential part of working toward tenure and promotion at Kent State, so I was still quite Villa-focused at work. At home, however, I had to plan for our wedding, help Lindsey figure out life in the States, spend time with family and friends, grade papers, write up our research... The time just kept running out. I remained high on the Knowing axis, but the *type* of knowledge was different. This wasn't the easy, automatic knowledge that comes with geographic immersion and being surrounded by fellow fans. I had to *work* for it. I had to make an effort to go to bbcfootball.com or the fan message boards to follow what was happening with the Villa. I still wanted to Know, and I absolutely still Cared, but I could feel it slipping away as the other demands on my time increased.

Less than two months after our May wedding, I found out I was pregnant. We were thrilled, and Lindsey agreed that we could give our first daughter the initials AVFC. In exchange, we would name our second child something to create THFC. (Her name starts with G. Oops.) Every month, I would take Avie's picture on an Aston Villa blanket I had bought during that first December-January trip where I had met her dad. She was a constant reminder of how Aston Villa has changed my life. Like others have found (Tinson, Sinclair and Kolyperas 2017; Trussell 2015), however, becoming a parent absolutely changed my relationship with Aston Villa.

2016-2017 season, or, the saddest conclusion I can imagine

Almost a decade after my love affair with the Villa began, our prospects look quite different. The context in which I am writing this paper is... depressing. And strange. It's almost surreal to remember when we were flush with optimism and excitement, and a seventh-place finish was disappointing. Things are looking bad for the Villa. Really, really bad. After flirting with relegation the past two seasons, our jig is up—we were sent down to the Championship in April 2016. I desperately wanted to be in Birmingham with my people when it happened, but I knew it wasn't possible, nor could I pop over in a sign of support as we launch our promotion campaign. I now have a family of four, and justifying the cost of flying to Brum so I can stand in solidarity with my Villa tribe—no matter how much I ache to—just isn't in the cards. So, instead, I will watch the season from afar. I won't let my husband talk about it, especially as the Spurs are annoyingly good. While I still wear my Villa jacket and scarf (and gloves, and hats...) I keep my Villa-ness private now. I don't want to talk about it. It *hurts* to talk about it. This team that I love, that I found through the American owner who also owned my football team, is going down. My friends that I found through this team are heartbroken and angry, rightfully so. I feel like my work—my presence—is a reminder of what promise Lerner brought when he took over. We had no idea

then that this would end so badly. I still know, although not nearly as much as I did before—in no small part because the Caring hurts too much. It broke my heart to watch this team I love fall apart, and a little voice inside my head keeps wondering if somehow I jinxed us.

As the 2015-2016 season ended, I dreaded checking Facebook, knowing that I would see the anger of Villa fans spilling across my new newsfeed. I half-heartedly rooted for Leicester City; if my team was going to be devastatingly awful, I was glad at least there is another one who can break through the lock at the top of the table. And of course, their closest competition were those damn Spurs. Worst case scenario, for sure. Well, second worst—at least Birmingham City still sucks.

But even with things as dreadful as they were last season, I hold onto the fact that I am, at heart, a Villan. We will be back in the Premier League, and I keep reminding those who ask that being a fan of a Championship team offers an authenticity that can't be matched by the 'plastic fans' who pick Manchester United or City, or Arsenal, or (God forbid) Tottenham Hotspur. We are lions. We are the pride of the Midlands. And as Annie and I wrote in our first published piece on the mighty Aston Villa Football Club (Osborne and Coombs, 2010), you know I am, I'm sure I am, I'm Villa till I die.

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