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# **'We All Dream of a Team of Carraghers': Comparing 'local' and Texan Liverpool fans' talk**

Dr. Joel Rookwood (email: [rookwoj@hope.ac.uk](mailto:rookwoj@hope.ac.uk))  
Senior Lecturer in Sport Sociology  
Liverpool Hope University  
Liverpool  
L169JD  
UK

Dr. Peter Millward (email: [p.millward@leedsmet.ac.uk](mailto:p.millward@leedsmet.ac.uk))  
Lecturer in the Sociology of Sport  
Leeds Metropolitan University  
Leeds  
LS63QS  
UK

## **'We All Dream of a Team of Carraghers': Comparing 'local' and Texan Liverpool fans' talk**

### **Key words:**

Football fandom, heroism, identity, locality, transnationalism, Liverpool Football Club

### **Abstract:**

There are strong grounds upon which it can be argued that the English Premier League (EPL) holds global appeal. This article carries out a semiotic analysis on the role that Liverpool F.C.'s Bootle-born defender, Jamie Carragher holds amongst two spatially disparate supporter communities, one principally based in Liverpool and the other in Texas. Despite the historical influence and connection with locally born players, evolving European migration patterns and continental football philosophies have limited the progression of 'Scouse' players at Liverpool. Jamie Carragher is a contemporary exception, who has become a focal point for the 'local' supporters' affections. His status has been propelled by his interpretation and implementation of the core working class values of the city and the club, displayed through his conduct off the pitch and his performances on it. Drawing from the perspectives of 'local' and Texas-based fans, this paper expands upon these issues, and examines Liverpool supporters' evolving heroism of Jamie Carragher. A mixed-method qualitative approach was adopted, involving ethnographic techniques, participant observation, interview methods and podcast analysis.

### **Introduction:**

The rise of global brand football clubs and increasing transnational coverage of the English Premier League (EPL) has given rise to important questions about the semiotic value of a football club and what it means to supporters that are spatially distant from each other, specifically how do they read the 'signs' of the football club? In this article we compare and contrast 'local' and Texan Liverpool supporters' discourses about the club's long-standing, Merseyside born defender, Jamie Carragher, as a form of cultural analysis in understanding geographically disparate football supporter culture.

Bridgewater (2010: 143) suggests that locally based fans often consider themselves 'better' or more 'loyal' supporters of a team than those who are geographically distanced from the club's home ground. Yet, in the transnational 'space of flows' (Castells 2000 [1996]; 1998; 2000a; 2009) there are those supporters who, because of time-zone differences, have developed unusual sleep patterns so that they can watch the team they support on television. Such supporters may never or only very rarely attend live games in the UK but this does not negate their claims to support. This article does not shed doubt on fans across the world feeling elation upon victory, or dejection after defeat, but it does listen to the stories told by Liverpool fans in the UK and USA about one of their club's key players, Bootle-born Jamie Carragher, and analysis is offered pertaining to what his 'sign' means to them, or how they 'read' and describe him (Lash and Urry 1994). In some respects, the comparative element is sparked by a comment in the South African-born and America-residing, Grant Farred's autobiography of his 'long-distance love' for Liverpool Football Club, in which he frequently refers to the club's former player John Barnes as 'God'. This compares to similar work by a Liverpool-based journalist, in which he repeatedly refers to Liverpool-born forward, Robbie Fowler (a former team-mate of Barnes) by that name (Reade 2009). Neither writer is entirely correct in their assertions – 'God' is simply a playful nickname given to a player, presumably on the basis of worship. There is evidence that Reade's label might resonate with many match-attending fans. For example, a flag regularly and prominently displayed at Liverpool matches during Fowler's

two stints as a player with the club included the phrase: "All those who have a red heart can rejoice for they have seen 'GOD' Mt.4:23"). However, evidence such as that presented by Reade is spurious as it only refers to one professional writer/fan's view, as does that offered by Farred. Football supporter culture, like any other form of culture, is collective and loosely shared across the 'webs of significance' which humans spin in their social interactions (Geertz 1973: 5).

Football players are amongst the key cultural symbols in the constitution of a collective identity around a football club, in terms of how fans relate to them, how they are described and how they are remembered (or forgotten). However the central question in this article is whether one particular player is described in a similar way by different fan groups across the world, who have some differences (and similarities) in the ways they consume football and follow their team. From this, an important contribution is made to the sociology of sport and fandom literature about the extent to which a common culture emerges – in what is presumed to be an increasingly transnational and spatially mobile society (see Urry 2000; 2003) – in support of one football team. Indeed, the issue of football players' reception from supporters has, surprisingly, received little attention amongst the plethora of social scientific work that looks at contemporary sport. Gilchrist (2005) and King (1995) provide two noticeable exceptions as both discuss the totemic role of sports icons as being perceived to reflect the values of their fans and become cultural symbols in the construction of the supporter community. King (1995) uses largely 'local' Manchester United supporters, to look at the conditional acceptance of the club's former iconic player Eric Cantona and argues that such supporters sometimes ascribe their own values on to him in the act of worship. Gilchrist (2005) discusses the common traits associated with the heroism of the sport star and argues that such athletes are often those which have overcome some personal or sporting difficulties as an 'underdog'. He argues that such people are not necessarily either media or wider cultural stars, nor do they have to be 'celebrities', but they must carry an iconic value to the sub-cultural group. The concept of the sports celebrity has been culturally explored with writings on David Beckham (Cashmore 2002), Mike Tyson (Cashmore 2004), Muhammad Ali (Lemert 2003) and Michael Jordan (LaFerber 1999). However given that it is accepted that groups of football supporters create strong collective identities, the ways in which fans' read the 'sign' of the player within their culture has received little exploration.

To do this, a mixed-method qualitative approach has been adopted. In the context of 'Scouse' – that is Liverpool-based – supporters of the club, this involved conducting interviews (IV) and focus groups (FG), as well collecting ethnographic material using a participant observation (PO) method, with data collected by one of the article's authors, who attended 270 of Liverpool's 286 fixtures (home and away, both domestically and in Europe) as both a researcher and a fan over a consecutive six-year period (between August 2003 and May 2008). Data was transcribed between May and November 2008. This long-term ethnography allows us to fully describe Liverpool supporters' 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of events surrounding Jamie Carragher during the data collection period than a shorter length of time in the field would have allowed. Supporters in this group were not only 'Scouse' but were tangential members of the 'Keep Flags Scouse', 'Reclaim the Kop' and the 'Spirit of Shankly' movements, which all sought/seek to claw back a sense of locally-based fans' cultural ownership of the club in an advanced capitalistic and globalised era for the club (see Wells 2007).

Texan-based supporters' stories and descriptions were captured through the utilisation of their 'Texas Boot Room' podcasts which can be freely found online at <http://texasbootroom.blogspot.com/>. Whilst many podcasts should be treated with some

caution as they may be produced by mainstream media outlets, the Texas Boot Room is an independent form which usually involves four men, Texans Scott Harlen, Michael Gray and Ted Price alongside Irish ex-patriot Derek Abell, discussing the results and cultural politics of a club in the back-room of a Texan public house. Sometimes these recordings take place immediately before, after or even on one occasion, during a televised Liverpool match in a local hostelry that has been adopted as a 'home' by the Texan Chapter of the Liverpool Supporters' Club, of which Ted Price is the chair. At the time of writing, 38 podcasts have been produced since the first one aired on 16 October 2007 at irregular frequencies. Extracts from these podcasts that discuss Jamie Carragher have been taken as data. Ruddock et al. (2010) have led the way in utilising this form of media in their analysis of Internet-based *MyFootballClub* consortium that bought non-league English club, Ebbsfleet United in 2008 and found that 'podcasts offer a compelling *narrative* [original authors' emphasis] that formalizes 'the MFC story', building a series of complementary themes around what was previously a little-known football club for the majority of overseas and domestic listeners, followers and members' (p. 7). Whilst we recognise that the qualitative nature of the two sets of data is different, we think some comparisons can be drawn as they highlight the supporters' attitudes in their 'typical' primary consumptions of football: the 'Scouse' fans in their match-attending activities and the Texan supporters in their productions of podcasts around the time they have just watched a televised match. This point made, we also want to recognise that these fan activities are 'typical' rather than lived in every instance, that is, on occasion, the 'Scouse' supporters will watch a match on television rather than travel to it, whilst Liverpool's Texan fans will sometimes travel to the UK to watch a match 'live', as they recognise this to be best fan experience. Despite their geographies both groups of fans are 'committed' as the 'Scouse' fans travel across England and the rest of Europe to watch their team's matches whilst the Texan-based supporters show their loyalties through watching matches during locally irregular times and making podcasts – to only very small audiences – about their views.

The reading of the 'signs' is paralleled with Carragher's public views, largely taken from his autobiography, entitled *Carra* (2008). Despite the fact that Carragher had given a small number of interviews which offered insights into his personal life, this was the first full book which had been written about him. The previous week, *The Daily Mirror* had serialised extracts from his text and provided the public with a preview. There has been a growth in football players' autobiographies in recent years with many – such as Chelsea and England left fullback, Ashley Cole's – being derided by the public at large. Carragher received no such derision and his book became the top selling sport-related book over the 2008 Christmas period on the Internet shopping website *Amazon*. Although there are clearly political and economic reasons why some stories may be told in an autobiography, we assume that the narrative Carragher told followed his true interpretation of the way events had unfolded in his career. Indeed, Carragher's autobiography confirmed widespread rumours that he grew up supporting local rivals Everton FC but that he would raise his children as Liverpool fans, whilst also telling more intimate details about his personal life during his parent's divorce whilst he was a teenager and how his mother's religious faith stopped her from nearly aborting her pregnancy with him after medical staff wrongly reported that he was likely to suffer with spina bifida.

### **Scene Setting – Football Fandom in the Local and Transnational Contexts:**

There is solid ground upon which the EPL can be described as a 'global football league' and Liverpool's longstanding worldwide status as a successful and glamorous football club – along with its role as a member of the transnational commercially-orientated (now defunct) pressure group, G14 – mean that it can be considered a key organisation in this development. From

2008/9 season, the EPL was broadcast to 211 nations across the world<sup>i</sup>, with a cumulative global audience of 4.77 billion people (interview with senior EPL finance director, 29 January 2009), and the total value of overseas rights to broadcast games approximately doubles with each new three-year contract signed, with the 2010 contract worth around £1.4 billion (Harris 2010). The 2010 World Cup finals saw the EPL clubs employ more of the competing players than any other league, and over half of the its clubs are currently under 'foreign' ownership. Quite clearly, the EPL forges transnational connections with people across the world in terms of in and out flows of capital, people and images. However, Armstrong and Mitchell's (2008) ethnographic study of Maltese football fans shows how both English and Italian football hold long-standing status in the country, spanning back until at least the early 1960s, with teams such as Liverpool, Juventus, Internazionale (both from Italy) and Manchester United the most widely supported teams, as local fans recognise that such clubs offer both a sporting spectacle and a higher quality of football than Maltese clubs can muster, highlighting the historical embeddedness of some of these connections.

Before the appointment of Englishman Roy Hodgson, Liverpool re-established itself as a force in European football in the context of recent transnational flows, under the guidance of the club's first non-British managers, Frenchman Gerard Houllier, and his Spanish successor Rafael Benitez. Both prioritised improvements to the playing staff, incorporating players acquired from other clubs domestically and internationally, as well as a core of those who progressed through the Liverpool youth system. Despite the significance of various players from the former category, many argue that key personnel from the latter have proven the most influential (Barrett 2007), thus highlighting the simultaneously local and transnational ethos connected to the club's resurgence. Some notable local products of the Centre of Excellence/Academy (in order of their first appearance for the club) include Steve McManaman, Robbie Fowler, Jamie Carragher, Michael Owen and Steven Gerrard. As the longest serving Liverpool player of his era, and holder of the club's European appearance record, Jamie Carragher has proven one of the most influential figures in the club's history. Having won ten medals as a Liverpool defender in a period that followed one of prolonged mediocrity, he has become a key focal point of the supporters' affections. Elite-level clubs in England have undergone a number of globalising developments in recent years (Boyle and Haynes 2004). Such changes often represent a significant shift away from traditional patterns, interests and priorities, as many clubs are increasingly gaining autonomy from their communities in terms of finances and fan support (Rowe and Gilmour 2008). In addition a celebrity culture has developed in many advanced capitalist societies, as relative to previous eras, the lifestyles and identities of players have become further removed from fans (Rojek 2005). For a club whose supporters traditionally represent a strong working-class ethos, Jamie Carragher is considered by the 'Scouse' fans to reflect several qualities which they respect and relate to, in an era where few players represent such values. For instance, in discussing the 'recent epic battles' between Liverpool and Chelsea, perceived to be 'a clash between football tradition and the arrogant rich', Carragher (2008: 91) notes: 'While we celebrate our working class roots, the Londoners love nothing more than to wave £20 notes at our visiting fans. Their players are granted the luxury of behaving like celebrities and superstars. Ours are expected to abide by a different set of values – the Shankly laws – and to show humility in a city where being flash is frowned upon'.

It is the locally-based fans that display this attitude most prominently. Similar types of supporters have been closely examined in previous studies, to varying levels of success. For instance, Taylor (1971; 1971a) perhaps over romanticises this type of fan. In an era that predates English football's recent transnational connections – at the time he published his

argument, there were still seven years of the Football Association's two year residency rule, which deterred overseas players from employment by English clubs – he argues that a sub-cultural rump of locally-based, working class fans had emerged who felt they were losing their grip on the game and their clubs which they once felt they had a cultural ownership of as well as the capacity to control their player's off-the-field behaviours (Taylor 1971; 1971a). In more recent years, King's (1997; 2002 [1998]) study of the 'lads' at Manchester United is more rigorous in data collection and systematic in analysis but finds that the group are typical of traditional supporters in that their preferred consumption of the game is to attend matches together, standing on terraces (rather than sitting in stands) and engaging in the 'crack', which involves them drinking, singing and potentially fighting together (see also Robson 2000). Whilst he posits that the lads most outwardly reject the commercialisation of football, he also states that their reactions to the new consumption of football can be paradoxical, 'complex and contradictory, comprising moments of opposition, when the board's interests contradict the lads' substantially autonomous but subordinate masculine culture but there are also moments of mutual interest when the club provides the lads with a central social and personal resource' (King 1997a: 342). To elaborate, King (1997a; 2002 [1998]) points out that many of the lads found it difficult to keep up with increases to match-day ticket costs and strongly opposed both the changes of football grounds to incorporate all-seater facilities and the increasing number of official merchandise sold primarily to 'consumer' fans, as these negatively impact upon their engagement with football. However, the same fans selectively approve some dimensions of the commercialisation of football by happily talking about their pride at Old Trafford – an all-seater stadium with several areas specifically designed for non-traditional supporters – as the best football ground in the UK and are pleased that 'the revenue that the club's merchandising operations brings in assists the club in competing in the international market for players' (King 1997a: 342). The lads also stress deep rooted familial ties to the club, typically talking about how their older family members once carried out many of the same activities that they do, even if King (1997a) believes this not to be true, given his interpretation that football terrace culture changed in the 1960s, and like Taylor's (1971; 1971a) sub-cultural rump, the lads believe themselves to be the 'bedrock support' of their club (King 1997a: 337).

Bourdieu (2000 [1990]) posited that cultural tastes and judgements are reducible to social positions. This is applicable in the understanding of football fan cultures, given that there are no definitive ways to read the 'signs' of the sport or individual clubs, but yet such distinction is evident within the ways that one type of supporter assumes that s/he is more 'authentic' than other groups. Nowhere is this more the case than within the traditional supporter groups, who view the sport and club in one particular way and – like the romantic tourist in Urry's (1995; 2002 [1990]) work 'consider it as 'authentic' or real' whilst attempting to 'make everyone else sacralise [it] in the same sort of way' (Urry 1995: 138). At Liverpool, many local supporters have demonstrated their sense of local identity by chanting 'We're not English, We are Scouse' and rejecting multiple forms of Englishness (Rookwood 2008; Millward 2009; Rookwood and Millward 2009). The importance of an imagined geography, based around a cultural link to Liverpool's locality has most clearly manifested itself in the 'Keep Flags Scouse' (KFS) and 'Reclaim the Kop' (RTK) cultural movements in the early twentieth century. The former of these was established by 'traditional' – and imagined as 'Scouse' – Liverpool fans during Liverpool's 2000/1 season successful UEFA Cup run in response to the perceived growing numbers of 'new consumer' Liverpool supporters who hail from outside of the city (such fans are known by Liverpool's traditional supporter base as 'Out of Town-ers' – or an OOT-ers, or as 'Wools'). The KFS group response was brought by their 'embarrassment' at seeing St. George's flags waved by 'day-trippers and nouveau fans' that 'brought along their small-town philosophies and Ing-ger-land attitudes' (Wells 2007: 3). It was reported that at the 2000/1 UEFA Cup final,

some of these flags were taken and destroyed, as a result of contravening the fictional 'Boss Wednesday Agreement'<sup>ii</sup> treaty where the rules of 'Scouse flags' were claimed to have been laid out. The movement is officially led by Larry Bin Limey, who is described as a 'Scouse warlord and reputed hot-dog vendor' (*RAOTL* 66, 2001: 6).<sup>iii</sup> KFS has a 'secret police' force which ensures the Boss Wednesday Agreement is upheld by covering banners which display non-Liverpool places with banners such as the 'We're not English, We are Scouse' flag as the group seeks to 'educate' new supporters into the traditional fans' culture and eradicate the new consumer supporter habits from the Kop, which is the end of Liverpool's Anfield home ground where many KFS members sit. RTK is a related fan movement which shares many of the KFS members but was launched in October 2006. Like KFS, the movement saw (which was effectively replaced by the Spirit of Shankly group formed in January 2008) saw itself as having an educational value in teaching new consumer fans how to support the club in a way that its members deemed appropriate.

Interestingly, in the context of the EPL's transnational dimensions, Kelly (2009: 47) points out that the relative lowering of the cost of trans-European air-travel and transnational televised coverage of the EPL means that it is now increasingly common for supporters who reside from outside the UK to attend live matches. This argument can be evidenced by Liverpool's Anfield ground – which normally sells out for the club's home games – having almost 8,000 vacant seats when flights were cancelled across the European airspace as a result of volcanic ash clouds, when West Ham United visited in April 2010. These were accounted for by overseas fans that could not physically travel to the ground as a direct result of the cancellation of air flights (Doyle 2010). However, in spite of this, far less work has been carried out on overseas supporters of English football and those projects that do look at this overwhelmingly tend to look at those based in Scandinavian countries (see Goksøy and Hognestad 1999; Hognestad 2006; 2009; Kerr 2009; Nash 2000; Reimer 2004). This is particularly the case amongst USA-based football supporters, who have received very little academic attention. Indeed, the slow take-up of football support in the USA has often been referred to as 'American exceptionalism' (Sugden 1994; Waddington and Roderick 1996; Markovits and Hellerman 2001) although Miller (2004), Silk and Chumley (2004) and Denison (2004) all suggest that this interest is gradually increasing. Nevertheless, Sherling's (2006) mock diary of fictional American Manchester United supporter, Roswell Shambling (who amongst other acts of 'inauthentic' fandom refers to the club as a 'franchise', wrongly believes that the English centre forward, Wayne Rooney, and the Portuguese winger Cristiano Ronaldo, are brothers, and thinks that centre back Rio Ferdinand is named 'Ferdinand Rio') merely serves to highlight a widespread British belief that the Americans do not 'understand' English football culture. Indeed, Giulianotti and Robertson (2007: 138) have studied the North American Supporters' Clubs of Glasgow teams Celtic and Rangers and showed that ex-patriot Scottish fans showed a general 'distaste for American fans' by questioning their knowledge of football. Alike to the rest of the article, this section looks at American supporters' cultural reading of the 'signs' of football. To do this, extracts taken from the Texan Chapter of the Liverpool Supporters' Club's 'Texas Boot Room' podcast are analysed. Typical to Appadurai's (1990; 1996) theory, Texan Boot Room narrowcasters seek to connect with the city of Liverpool through whatever 'scape' they can, which is often found in popular music and, for instance, the group like to talk at length about Liverpool's most famous pop band, The Beatles, and have 'Moving to New York' – a single by contemporary Liverpool band, The Wombats – as the show's opening music. Group members also regularly regale stories detailing the content of Liverpool football-themed Internet messageboard threads they have read and participated in since the previous narrowcast, and often make a point of telling listeners that they use the forums that Liverpool-based fans post upon. It is true to argue that a sense of 'glocalisation' (Giulianotti and Robertson 2006; 2009) is evident in the podcasts



as the group often make sense of issues emerging in the EPL with examples from American sports although, also in line with Giulianotti and Robertson's (2006) argument, the group members do make a point of hoping that the popularity of football, the EPL and Liverpool continues to grow. The choice of the Texan Chapter of the supporters' club as a data source is entirely deliberate, given that Tom Hicks, the co-owner of Liverpool that is particularly unpopular amongst the 'local' or 'Scouse' supporters detailed, hails from the state.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Evidence from Liverpool – 'Local' supporters' views:**

The general consensus from locally-based supporters suggests that Carragher was not initially considered to be a 'crowd favourite', with many having questioned his ability, attitude, maturity and dedication to Liverpool during the early stages of his career. Despite the fact he has only played for one professional club, his acceptance as a Liverpool player was gradual rather than instantaneous: 'Fans here give local lads every chance, but Carra developed into a Liverpool legend, he wasn't born one. He was a blue as a kid, and he arsed around and struggled to find form or settle in the side. It was years before he became a legend. But he proved himself on the pitch and came to show he is one of us off it' (IV, Bordeaux: October 2006).

In the eyes of local supporters, Carragher's career trajectory changed and he began to perform consistently in 2000/2001 season. Despite beginning as a midfielder, he became the club's established left fullback during that season. He scored the winning penalty in the shoot-out in the League Cup final (the first trophy Liverpool had secured in six years), and also figured heavily in the FA and UEFA Cup triumphs: 'With the Mancs winning the proper treble in '99 and the fact we hadn't won the League or European Cup, 2001 wasn't celebrated as much. But it was some season, and Carra came of age that year' (PO, Athens: May 2007). Carragher also played in the number 23 shirt, something he has kept 'despite plenty of opportunities to move up the pecking order' (Carragher, 2008: 107). When he was offered a lower number in recognition of his growing seniority at the club he: 'rejected the proposal. Being 23 was more distinctive. Only Robbie Fowler had worn it before more, and I saw no reason to change, especially as the lads had gone to such a grand effort with that flag' (p. 184). The banner in question was produced by Carragher's friends and relatives in celebration of the UEFA Cup final appearance in Dortmund, and read: '*BOOTLE'S FINEST – 23 CARRA GOLD.*' As one local fan noted, '23 is everyone's favourite number now. The fact he kept the number because of the flag and the link with Fowler says it all. Players and fans from other clubs wouldn't know the connection, but Carra puts the fans first. That was the start of it all' (PO, Charlton: February 2006).

Respondents argued that it was not until Carragher had become more established that supporters became increasingly interested in his background:

When a lad from Liverpool makes it everyone wants to know where's he's from and that, to see if he's the genuine article. It's like the Beatles. And stories started going around about how committed he was in training and we could see he was a winner. His performances improved every week which showed his loyalty (IV, Newcastle: November 2007).

Reflecting on his attitude to training and playing for Liverpool, Carragher (2008: 138) argues: 'If there's a fifty-fifty challenge to be had, I don't give a shit ...how much they've cost. This is my Liverpool shirt we're talking about. No one is waltzing into Melwood and taking it off me without a fight.' Locally-based fans suggested that the defender has come to represent:

[A] connection with the fans. It's how he plays but also it's who he is. He is one of us, a working-class lad. And that comes across more with him than any other footballer in the league (PO, Fulham: May 2007).

In his autobiography, Carragher confirmed that: 'I thought of myself as the biggest blue in Bootle' (2008: 35).<sup>v</sup> However, interview material evidences that Carragher's love of Everton was not considered a cause for criticism from the perspective of 'Scouse' Liverpool fans, who had also idolised boyhood 'Evertonians' Ian Rush and Robbie Fowler during their Liverpool careers. It is also noteworthy that Carragher's former team mates Steve McManaman and Michael Owen were other Everton supporters who went on to represent Liverpool. Interview material gives a clear indication of how rivalry with local opposition is played out through local supporters' identification:

Liverpool fans don't care if you were a blue, as long as you let it go. Rush and Fowler are gods because they were great players who gave Everton up. Carra's the same. But McManaman was always an Evertonian. To become accepted here Liverpool needs to be your number one priority (IV, Chelsea: September 2006).

This evidence is interesting because it illustrates that in order for a local player to become accepted as the fans' hero, he must assimilate into their culture. To be clear, there is no doubt that – like Rush and Fowler – McManaman was a high-quality player (amassing 364 appearances and 66 goals over a nine-year period) for Liverpool, however, a regular suspicion, which emerges in this evidence, is that he always continued to support Everton rather than become a Liverpool fan. The local supporters did not level the accusation that he did not try his best for Liverpool but merely that he did not assimilate into the club, with the clearest evidence being the nature and circumstances of his departure to Real Madrid (c.f. Fowler to Leeds, Rush, Carragher etc). One reason that Carragher has attained cult status at Liverpool is that he has crossed the city's cultural divide and immersed himself into club's culture.

Elements of existing popular and academic examinations of Liverpoolian culture have been criticised for representing little more than 'wisps of idle speculation' (Grant, 2007: v). Beal (2007: viii) discusses the 'stigmatization if not demonization' attached to Liverpool and its people by the media and within popular consciousness, which it is claimed have functioned to blur our understanding. Such confusion is thought to be particularly notable in the context of Liverpool's correlation with national identity: 'Some say that it [Liverpool] is not England at all, but almost a city state in its own right, distinct from the rest of the country in language... customs and attitudes' (Grey and Grant 2007: 1). The complexity of this issue is highlighted by the ongoing developments to the socio-political, economic, and cultural fabric of the city. The fusing of these evolving elements, punctuated by the experience of particular key events, has impacted civic and national identities in Liverpool.

In the case of Liverpool FC, our evidence suggests a key criterion by which 'Scouse' fans judge the players is through their perceived approach to and involvement in international competition. For local supporters this has become a key context and medium to form and express allegiances to city and country. Michael Owen provides a case in point, and a useful comparison to Carragher in this context, if the evidence presented so far sees: McManaman as connected to Everton, (just as John Terry is connected to Chelsea and Gary Neville to Manchester United), Owen was seen to be 'English', as the following evidence testifies:

He achieved so much for Liverpool, but we never really took to him. More than anyone he was England first and foremost (PO, Bolton, January 2005).

He was world class. After the treble in 2001 he became the only Liverpool player ever to have won European Footballer of the Year. But he was already an England man by then (PO, Newcastle, March 2006).

It wasn't just being successful for England. It was the fact he always talked about them. We accept players play for their countries. But your priority must be Liverpool. Owen never came across as a Liverpool player in interviews, just an England player (IV, Juventus: April 2005).

He gave us ten years, scored goals, won trophies, and never had any problems off the field. He was squeaky clean, which was part of the problem. But he saw England as the pinnacle and most of his decisions were based on that (IV, Leverkusen, March 2005).

This evidence clearly shows that local Liverpool supporters knew the extent of Owen's talent. Like McManaman, he progressed through Liverpool's youth system (joining aged 13), making his debut at the age of 17 in August 1997 and becoming the club's leading goal-scorer in every season from this point until he left to join Real Madrid in August 2004. Like McManaman, it was not that local Liverpool supporters appeared to dislike Owen, but that they saw him – from a middle class background and raised, ironically, on the North Wales borders – as being detached from their fan culture. Ten months after making his Liverpool debut, Owen played a starring role in England's 1998 World Cup finals team, scoring two goals, one most notably against Argentina. Local fans often discuss 'the England situation', with many perceiving Jamie Carragher's attitude towards international football to have contrasted that of Michael Owen. Although he was awarded 34 full England caps, and had held the record for the U21 team with 27 appearances, Carragher was considered: 'a different type of international. By playing he showed he was good enough, but by fucking them off he showed he was a true Scouser' (PO, Arsenal: April 2008).

There is little evidence to suggest that Carragher holds a disinterest in the English national team, in the way local Liverpool supporters suggest he does but there is evidence to suggest that he prioritises his commitments to Liverpool. For instance in his autobiography, he made the following statements which unambiguously show that his priorities belong with Liverpool rather than England:

Sitting on the England coach as it prepared to drive us away from the world Cup in Germany, I received a text message. 'Fuck it. It's only England'... There's no such concept as 'only England' to most footballers. Representing your country is the ultimate honour, especially in the World Cup. Not to me. [...] Whenever I returned home from disappointing England experiences one unshakable overriding thought pushed itself to the forefront of my mind... 'At least it wasn't Liverpool'. The Liver Bird mauled the three lions in the fight for my loyalties (Carragher 2008: 186-187).

Both the player and local supporters note that he 'tried for England but got tired of being overlooked' (PO, Arsenal: April 2008). Carragher retired from international football in Estonia in June 2007, noting: 'I'd rather add two more years to my Liverpool career than jeopardise this for England... I wasn't giving up my football career or my ambitions. Only England' (Carragher

2008: 219; 220). After making the announcement, Carragher (2008: 217) 'switched on TalkSport and heard a discussion about my decision. The presenter, Adrian Durham, accused me of being a bottler. I was raging... I felt compelled to defend myself, so I called Durham on air to confront him.' During the nine-minute conversation that followed he said to Durham: 'If you've got any bottle come down to Anfield or Melwood and say it to me and we'll see what happens' (TalkSport). Local Liverpool supporters argued that the decision together with this response made Carragher: 'Even more of a hero. To play and win trophies for your club, get treated like shit by England, and then just walk away from them. He's a legend. He's become everything every Scouser wants to be' (PO, Porto: September 2007).

Carragher's dedication to Liverpool, and determination to win trophies with the club, together with the circumstances of his retirement from international football have helped propel his status amongst 'Scouse' Liverpool supporters. His off the field behaviour and reflective comments however are considered particularly significant. The local fan base perceive these to have been intuitive and representative of 'real Liverpool fans', who consider themselves a maligned, misunderstood and misrepresented demographic: 'He has become a spokesman for the real Liverpool fans. The local lads who go everywhere. In interviews and in his book too, he never sits on the fence. But he also says exactly what we're thinking, especially about Scousers being separate' (IV, Wigan: September 2007). This comment is particularly interesting given that it drives at the issue of fan authenticity, by claiming that the player speaks for the 'real fans'. Quite clearly, the local fans believe that they are the club's 'real fans'. Whilst we are not doubting their authenticity, we follow King (1997) in arguing that fandom cannot be inauthentic and as such, anyone who defines themselves as so, must be a fan. However, Carragher (2008: 189) appears to substantiate the local supporters' views: 'The 'us' and 'them' syndrome developed and it's still going strong. I've heard The Kop sing 'We're not English, we are Scouse.' There's no affinity with the national team. While Liverpool as a city suffered economically during the eighties... our football clubs were the best in Europe. It was the one area where Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government couldn't hurt us... The identity of our clubs is connected to the reputation of our city, so Liverpool and Everton always came first. We were revelling in our region's glory, not sharing it with the rest of the country.' As one supporter noted:

We're *in* England, but not *of* England. Liverpool's separate socially, and through politics too. We're not saying we want our own country, but we are unique. Football is the one place we can say that through songs and flags. And Carragher is the spokesman for the Kopite. Like the banner says: 'We're not English we are Scouse'. He'll be a hero forever because he was the first to stand up and say it (IV, Milan: March 2008).

At the third round FA cup tie at Highbury in January 2002, after a coin had been thrown at him he threw it back into the crowd, an action which earned him a red card and a disrepute charge from the FA. As a recognition and celebration of this act of rebellion, and indeed what the player had come represent to Liverpoolians, fans responded with the song that then became widely associated with Carragher: 'He's Scouse, he's sound, he'll twat with a pound, Carragher, Carragher.' This chant was largely replaced however during the 2004-2005 season by the song: 'We all dream of a team of Carraghers.' Although Liverpool won the Champions League that season, the campaign began and ended with uncertainty surrounding the futures of Michael Owen and Steven Gerrard respectively. This vocal response clearly emphasised who Liverpool many supporters most closely related to, both as a player and a person: 'The song's a lesson for the foreign players, but it's also a reminder to the local lads about what we stand

for. With Owen jumping ship and Gerard nearly doing likewise, the local players need the reminder. Gerrard might be our best player, but Carragher is more one of us, so he's our favourite' (PO, Anderlecht: October 2005).

### **The Texas Boot Room: American Supporters' Views**

Members of the Texas Boot Room are also highly committed in their approach to Liverpool fandom although some members are open in respect to their fairly recent following of the club. For instance, during the podcast to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster (see Scraton 1999) the three American members said very little as the Irish member of the team, Derek Abell, relived his memories (*Texas Boot Room* 39, 16 April 2009). The Texan supporters are not naïve to all of the rivalries in English football, and in common with their 'Scouse' counterparts, do see Everton and Manchester United as Liverpool's major rivals. The symbolic role of the club's Spanish striker Fernando Torres to the group is important, as they appear to define him as the key player at the club. This shares some commonality with the locally-based Liverpool supporters, who also recognise his value to the team. However, it is noteworthy that in his case, his playing skills and personal attributes are bound together, so it is he who is largely described as having the deepest 'love for the club' (*Texas Boot Room* 34, 16 April 2009) amongst its current employees and was described as 'God' by Ted Price less than one year after joining the club (*Texas Boot Room* 20, 3 July 2008).

On first examination, fans in the *Texas Boot Room* appear to view Jamie Carragher in a similar way to the Liverpool-based supporters that were earlier discussed. It is certainly true that they appreciate Carragher, as both a person and a football player and they show their endearment of him by calling him either 'Jamie' or 'Carra', rather than by his full name, as they do with many other players although he is less central in their discussions than many other Liverpool players. This point taken, the group have never seen him as 'undroppable', which is a status reserved for 'Pepe [Reina], Stevie [Gerrard] and Torres' (Derek Abell, *Texas Boot Room* 27, 21<sup>st</sup> November 2008). Indeed, after Carragher performed less well in the 2009/10 season than he had for in the previous years, the group were prepared to criticise the player but chose to do so by qualifying this:

**Michael Gray:** The most disappointing player of the year, and this pains me, is Jamie Carragher. He was really poor this year.

**Ted Price:** I don't think it really pains anybody to be honest with you.

**Michael Gray:** There is no-one who supports Liverpool who doesn't love Jamie because Jamie is just Liverpool through and through. And no-one can question his desire or his heart, or anything. I'd even go as far as to say that I'm not entirely blaming him. I mean, the backline rotated consistently, there were a lot of contributing factors. But I've always thought that Jamie is a guy who's excelled on a couple of things – heart and determination, not athletic ability. He is never going to be the greatest athlete on the field but the guy just has heart and determination – unbelievable! But he was just not good this year and it was interesting that he finally got an England call-up – I say finally – he accepted an England call-up.

**Derek Abell:** As much as I agree with you that Carra was disappointing for the first half of the season, for me it's not even close. The most disappointing player was Steven Gerrard.

### **Texas Boot Room 39, 12 May 2010.**

The discourse emerged in a narrowcast debate about who had been Liverpool's most disappointing player in 2009/10 season. Michael Gray, who pushed forward the idea that this player was Carragher, qualifies his statement by talking about his 'love' for Carragher and the 'pain' he is experiencing in making his point although this does not make him immune from criticism. It is interesting that, alike to the Liverpool-based fans discussed earlier in the paper, Michael Gray stresses Carragher's 'heart and determination' over his 'athletic abilities' although he interprets the player's call-up to the 2010 World Cup with the English national team as something to celebrate. As earlier discussed, the locally based Liverpool supporters tended to prefer that Carragher held an indifference to the England team, instead preferring to concentrate on club duties – and Carragher displayed this attitude in his autobiography by talking about the limited appeal playing for England held for him. However, at the end of the 2009/10 season, Carragher declared his availability for selection by England coach Fabio Capello into the World Cup squad, and appeared at the tournament. Whilst many local fans accepted his decision by interpreting it as a 'last chance' to play in an international tournament (particularly in the light of Liverpool failing to qualify for the following season's Champions League), they tended not to celebrate it. It is also noticeable that however much the group profess to 'love' Carragher, they are seemingly all too keen to point out that he 'is showing his age' (Derek Abell, *Texas Boot Room 39*, 12 May). For instance in 2008, the group discussed:

**Michael Gray:** Jamie, now, is slowly getting into a position where his position as a starting centre back, week in and week out, in the next season starts to waiver a bit.

**Derek Abell:** He's almost there, not quite yet.

**Michael Gray:** He's approaching that part.

**Ted Price:** But his play hasn't dropped off. His age has gone up but his play hasn't dropped off.

**Derek Abell:** But if they [Agger and Skrtel] continue to develop the way they have for a season or two, come a season and a half – so that will be 2010/11 – Jamie will be a little bit older and these two will be at the peak of their talent and they will develop even further and you'd have to go with them.

**Texas Boot Room 27, 21 November 2008.**

At the time of the narrowcast, Carragher was 30 years old and Liverpool's squad contained a number of players – such as Finnish defender Sami Hyypia – who were older than him. Indeed, the club had signed some players who were considerably older than him in the past. It is often the case that football supporters will look to the future in the hope that the team will improve and it is possible that the members of the Texas Boot Room were doing this when discussing Carragher; by hoping that younger central defenders Daniel Agger and Martin Skrtel will improve to the extent that Carragher will no longer be needed. Whilst the local fans also placed precedence on the team development rather than personal feelings toward one player, they were not so keen to dispense with Carragher, perhaps highlighting a deeper personal attachment to him than those in Texas.

## Conclusion

Football fandom is an interesting site for cultural analysis. A wealth of literature in the field shows a multiplicity of fandom, which involve differing levels of both an attachment to a club and ways of consuming events. Yet, one interpretation of the sign is not more 'real' than another as King (2002 [1998]: 194) argues that 'fans become fans simply by considering themselves to be so; it is impossible to suggest they are not so'. Football fandom is effectively the shared meaning that is taken from the sport or a particular club, yet these interpretations and values are social across members within a group who come to define it. Hence, local and overseas fan groups become imagined as a form of 'community' (Anderson 1991 [1983]). From the field of tourism, Urry (1995: 157) has suggested that 'much of the 'nostalgia' and 'tradition' of the place may in fact be invented by groups who 'read' signs' in a way that appeases their collective interests, and this is often applicable to sport as supporters define authenticity by looking into a metaphorical mirror and describing their own traits and habits. To understand the semiotics of football culture, the symbols which define the collective narratives must be selected: football players can take on this value amongst the supporter communities.

Jamie Carragher was chosen as a crucial human symbol as he is portrayed to represent very local interests in a team which carries and contains global values and players. Locally-based Liverpool fans appreciate his membership in the club's playing team as they view him as representing their interests and values. Texan-based Liverpool fans also show a keen appreciation for these values, and respect Carragher for representing an imagined notion of the club (perhaps as the local fans), but show subtle differences in their cultural reading of him, for instance they portray him as closer to the end of his career than he possibly might be. Despite this, the local and transnational supporter cultures of 'committed fans' seem far closer than might be imagined, even if it would be unfair to talk about a 'global culture' of fans currently existing. This closeness may be propelled through the Internet and, particularly, the widespread development of Web 2.0 technologies which allows fans from all over the world to talk and share their views – and converge in attitudes, even if this represents a spread of local values across the world rather than a genuine hybridisation. Discussions around global cultures of supporters of English football are particularly important in an era where EPL games are broadcast to over 200 countries and the gap in direct financial value between international and domestic broadcasting agreements is rapidly closing, with the league becoming a truly global competition. In using fan discourses across the world we have discussed some of the cultural issues which will continue to emerge in this field in the light of a global-local nexus.

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<sup>i</sup> Strangely this figure is higher than both the number of UN member states and FIFA associations, which currently stands at 192 and 208 respectively.

<sup>ii</sup> 'Boss' is Liverpool-based colloquial term for something that is referred to as good.

<sup>iii</sup> *RAOTL* (2001) 'I Wanna Be A Banner Man' 66:6-7.

<sup>iv</sup> Liverpool had enjoyed prolonged stability under the chairmanship of David Moores. However the club was sold to American tycoons George Gillett and Tom Hicks for £470m in February 2007.

<sup>v</sup> The 'nickname' Everton FC's fans give to their team are the 'blues' – signifying the club's colour of home jersey – or the 'toffees', which draws parallel to Everton mints.