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**Clubhouses and locker rooms: sexuality, gender and the growing
participation of women and gender diverse people in Australian football**

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Abstract: The launch of the Australian Football League Women's (AFLW) combined with the introduction of grassroots women's Australian football across the country have challenged the landscape of Australian sport and sport media in recent years. Many young women and gender diverse people have had the opportunity to participate in contact sports such as Australian football for the first time. With this, has come exposure to off-field spaces and cultures that they have previously been excluded from, such as post-sport pub culture and locker rooms. Through qualitative interviews with grassroots players in the Hunter Region, this paper explores how spaces can encourage and provide opportunity for women to challenge binary expectations through comradery and acceptance of masculine bodily displays in conjunction with the normalization of non-heterosexuality. We conceptualise the 'sport-sexuality-assemblage' as a way of accounting for the relations of desire for women and gender diverse people in a range of sport spaces.

Keywords: feminism; sexuality; affect; youth cultures; gender; AFLW

Introduction

Over the past three or so years in Australia there have been two dramatic changes in the sport and leisure landscape. Firstly, with the launch of the professional women's Australian Football League (AFLW), a new sport entertainment product entered the scene (*Note: AFLW and AFLM refer to the national women's and men's professional leagues. Australian Football refers to the game itself, and is used to discuss the grassroots level of the sport. The participants of the study are local grassroots Australian Football players*). However, this was not just a simple sporting product, but in many ways a revolutionary one. For the first time, paid sportswomen playing Australian football in a national competition were being broadcast on major television networks. Many players were open about their sexuality, giving visibility to same-sex or non-heteronormative relationships throughout the media. Visibility of these relationships has meant that, in a number of instances, same-sex or non-heteronormative relationships and displays of affection are now being broadcast nationally as 'normal' and 'everyday' occurrences. These displays are in stark contrast to the AFL men's, where dominant notions of heterosexual masculinity are the norm (Marks 2019). Secondly and concurrently, there has been a significant increase in the numbers of girls, women and gender diverse people playing Australian football across the country at grassroots level, signifying a quantitative and qualitative shift in the atmosphere at local footy clubs, once the preserve of heterosexual men. Contact sports like Australian football, which are typified by rough and tough play and often understood as 'sport for men and boys' are being changed by the entrée of women and girls, yet what these changes look and feel like are as yet unknown.

In this article we explore the emergence (and acceptance) of diverse sexualities in sport. We discuss the way media representations of AFLW and the experience of entering sporting spaces

supports (or does not) women's experiences of belonging in a local grassroots football league. In particular we attend to the spatiality of sport and where, when and how sexuality becomes foregrounded in this space through in-depth qualitative interviews over a three-month period in early 2019. We argue that through the introduction of the women's Australian football competition in Newcastle and the Hunter, granting access to previously men's spaces, new forms of sexuality are being supported or evolving in sport. Accessibility coupled with the way the AFLW provides a platform that challenges issues of sexism and homophobia. In the following section we discuss the political nature of space and how it influences what can and cannot be enacted. We then argue that spaces are an integral part of what Fox and Alldred (2013) call the 'sexuality-assemblage'.

Australian football, the AFLW and a Shift in Sport Media

Australian football is a code played throughout Australia, with dominant roots in the state of Victoria. The game is composed of four quarters with 18 players on the field for men's games, and 16 on the field for women's. It is considered a high intensity contact sport, with players able to be tackled from any direction once they take possession of the football and is played on an oval field. The code has a National competition, the Australian Football League (AFL), with a recently introduced women's professional league (AFLW).

The introduction of the AFLW in 2017 brought a wave of exposure to women's sport that challenged the landscape of Australian sport and sport media, and as a result, has begun to challenge the 'maleness' of contact sports (Willson et al. 2017). The momentum surrounding the AFLW continued through to the first official match in 2017, with crowds being turned away as the stadium reached maximum capacity (Willson et al. 2017) which was thoroughly unexpected by the AFL organisers. Although women and gender diverse people playing Australian football

is not a new phenomenon, women's sport has been historically situated as inferior to that of men's, receiving significantly less media coverage and has been removed from narratives of sport (Willson et al. 2017; Darvin and Sagas 2017).

Beyond challenging the 'maleness' of contact sport, the AFLW has challenged heteronormative narratives which have traditionally dominated the Australian media landscape. While the AFL men's has had no openly queer players, the AFLW demonstrates accounts of various sexual identities on display. Some of the most prominent players in the league are in same-sex or non-heteronormative relationships (See Olle 2017; Cherny 2021), giving visibility to a family dynamic that differs to the traditional heteronormative narrative usually presented in sporting contexts (for example, the focus on Wives and Girlfriends, see Marks 2019). The new wave of media coverage therefore has the power to shift what is accepted as normality. Individuals often unconsciously perform in a way that imitates social norms (Butler 1993, 12; Butler 1999). The results of our study reveal that sporting spaces provide women and gender diverse people the opportunity to perform gender and sexuality in multiple ways while still being within the norms of their sporting culture.

Trans and non-binary identities have also been brought into conversation, with an openly transgender women's player contesting her eligibility to play in the AFLW (Ordway and Twigg 2017). While it can be argued that the AFL has not supported inclusion for transgender people, there is an ongoing shift through the professional women's leagues toward visibility of a broader range of identities outside of the usual heteronormative narrative. From the beginning, the AFLW has been expected to have enormous social, cultural and economic impacts on sport in general, as well as women's participation and leadership within the sporting field (Willson et al. 2017). There is still far to go in providing full inclusivity, however, non-cis-male bodies and

identities are starting to be seen through the changing sporting landscape in Australia.

Sexuality, sport and space

Examples abound of spaces where women and gender diverse people have not been allowed to enter, with court cases contesting young girls' eligibility to even participate in Australian football (Willson et al. 2018, 1711). From clubhouses, locker rooms, and even ovals and fields, women and gender diverse people's exclusion from these spaces has shaped sport and sporting subjects in particular ways. Feminist sport geography provides an opportunity to explore the way that space is able to embody identity and sexual politics. Sport itself is an affective assemblage (Pavlidis 2018, 250), made up of material (including spatial) and human parts. Taking up the Deleuzian concept of assemblage, Pavlidis posits the 'sport-assemblage' as a way of accounting for the relations of desire between the human and non-human elements that make up sport. These relations are often in tension and relate to the spaces, practices, and affects entangled (Pavlidis, 2018). Desire is central to conceptualisations of assemblage (Buchanan, 2021) and supports an understanding of sporting spheres as fluid and contingent.

More broadly within feminist geography, scholars such as Massey have demonstrated the ways space is constructed from both ordered and chaotic components, and hence the impossibility of limiting space to a static notion (Massey 1993). It is in this way that space is always open to political interference where political identities, sexualities and communities can be contested and reterritorialized (Pavlidis 2018). Individuals' act in accordance to the conditions and 'rules' of particular environments. Certain arenas (such as sporting environments) hold connotations and ideologies of what should, and does, happen inside of them. As argued by Lefebvre, 'there is politics of space, as space is political', and therefore can be a vehicle of struggle (in Stuart 2007, 106-107). It is this ordered and chaotic aspect of space that, although has historically

marginalised women in sport and even enabled abuse and violence towards women (Flood and Dyson, 2007), can also enable struggles to reconfigure gender and sexuality in productive ways. These political factors of an area can influence (or be influenced by) the bodies within, and therefore provide a platform of territorialization, and reterritorialization. In simple terms, though space is political, it *can* be changed, though this is neither straightforward nor easy.

Cathy van Ingen (2003) provides a provoking analysis using Lefebvre's work to discuss how bodies, and sexuality, can create or shape social and sporting spheres. As argued, sport and physical activity are evident forms of 'spatial practice', which act to shape a social space (van Ingen 2003, 203). Within these, are signs and markers that represent particular ideas, values and behaviours that are acceptable in that environment (van Ingen 2003, 203). These social markers act in a way that regulate and shape sporting bodies and bodily performance. Sport is moved beyond the parameters of the game in which it is played as a result, making sport understood through its accepted values and behaviours which can exist in environments such as pubs and locker rooms.

Athletes can often be aware of perceptions of gendered and sexuality norms associated with specific sports, as argued by Marfell (2019) in an exploration of feminized netball bodies in sporting arenas. Different sporting spheres produce different expectations and bodily displays of sexuality and gender. Similar to the way that space enables the production and reproduction of accepted heteronormative displays of masculinity in male-dominated sports, it is able to encourage dominant forms of femininity in sports such as netball (Marfell 2019: 596). Marfell explains this by discussing playing attire in netball. Mandatory dress combined with rule modifications were traditionally enforced to restrict player's movements, reproducing ideal femininity and steer away from "unwomanly" behaviours such as jumping and contact.

Similarly, Caudwell (2003) follows the common trajectory of women's sporting bodies being governed by a heteronormative framework through a study of football in the UK. While footballing bodies are subject to ridicule or marginalization for sitting outside of the compulsory heterofemininity, there is evident signs of resistance to gendered-differentiation, with participants self-identifying as "boyish" and being aware of players displaying body hair despite known association with maleness (Caudwell 2003, 384-385). For Caudwell, sex, like arguments of gender and sexuality, is not necessarily a 'fixed' state.

We can then understand sporting spaces as an avenue of intersectionality where the individual, gender and sexuality are in a constant state of flux (Waite and Clifton 2013, 489). In these spaces struggles occur over how femininity and masculinity are being enacted. The grapple for gendered expression shapes individual identity in accordance with the space where it is taking place, while at the same time shaping the space itself. As Waite and Clifton (2013) demonstrate in their research on bodyboarding in the Illawarra region of NSW, bodily performances (such as performing manoeuvres that require strength and skill to show masculinity) during these sporting activities hold heteronormativity at the core of sporting expertise. While dispositions work to shape one's habitus, sporting bodies and spaces are reflexively challenging and shaping gendered subjectivities (Waite and Clifton 2013, 487).

Spatiality can be lived through passive means, shaping behaviours and ideals subconsciously. However, it is also territory for contest and resistance, where struggles over power occur (van Ingen 2003, 204). As noted by van Ingen (2003, 204) 'lived space is both oppressive and enabling'. The intersection of sexuality, gender and race exist within these social spaces and require further investigative thought beyond the physical understandings of space, where discrimination, power struggles and hierarchies are not always directly visible (van Ingen 2003,

212). While boundaries are set in accordance to the rules of the social space, the rules are able to be challenged, negotiated and reterritorialized. It is through this, we argue that sporting spaces are being used to challenge heteronormative expectations and identities for participants.

Judith Butler's notion of 'performativity' is central to much of the sporting geography work regarding gender and sexuality. As humans we are regulated by what we perceive to understand as the 'correct' way of being socially normal. Through this perceived reality, individuals use bodily acts of performance to mimic what is 'regular' (Butler 1993, 12). These rules of what is 'regular' within a social space are embedded within a person's sense of self, and ultimately the way they perceive the world, therefore becoming accepted as second nature (Butler 2010, 116). In this way people and their performance are able to be shaped in accordance to the signs and markers within a particular space, as discussed by van Ingen above. Therefore, sexuality, femininity and identity are entangled with the spatial in ways that are productive (and at times limiting).

Opening the field: women's footy in a post-industrial city

The data this paper draws on was gathered in the Hunter region and the city of Newcastle in New South Wales, a post-industrial, heritage city that has been through a process of reinvention and revival in recent years (Marsden 2004, 23). Historically the city has been known for its industrial roots, specifically due to its hosting of the world's largest coal port and sea trade (Marsden 2004, 23). The closure of the major and iconic steelworks marked a significant moment in the history of Newcastle. As a result, the city has emerged as a more economically and socially diverse city (Marsden 2004, 23). The Australian football women's competition in the area is a recent phenomenon, only introduced in 2015. For many, the introduction of the league was their first opportunity to not only engage in the sport of Australian football, but their first exposure to club

culture and locker rooms/change rooms (Fusco 2003, 161-162). These spaces have been previously dominated by men as a social space that both produced and produce differences and binaries as norms (Fusco 2004,161-162). Australian football in Newcastle has introduced women and gender diverse people to a spatial experience of community, comradery and sociality, and sexuality, which they hadn't previously experienced.

Traditionally Victoria has been the state dominated by Australian football, with other states such as Queensland and New South Wales having strong roots in rugby league. Newcastle and the Hunter region provides a unique opportunity to examine women and gender diverse peoples participation in Australian football, as unlike other areas (such as Victoria or even Sydney) there was no opportunity for participation prior to 2015, and little exposure to the sport itself. This is because Newcastle has predominately been known as a Rugby League city, with much of the sporting culture focused on the Newcastle Knights and local league competitions. However, this is being contested, with other local professional sports (such as the Newcastle Jets Football/Soccer Club, who also host a women's team) and local grassroots sports, such as Australian football. This expansion can be seen throughout New South Wales, with the AFL announcing growth of 76% in women's grassroots football in the state on the back of the inaugural AFLW season. The Hunter region saw increasing numbers since the introduction of the local league in 2015, with growth almost doubling on the back of the AFLW's first season (AFL 2017 Annual Report). Australian football has never been the dominant sport in Newcastle, however, women entering the game has evidently driven the growth of the sport in the region. Previously, the only contact sport available in the region for women and non-cis men was rugby union. Rugby League now offer a women's competition in the region alongside soccer, Rugby Union and Australian football.

Methodology

The research aimed to investigate the relationship between the professionalization of women's AFL and corresponding media exposure, and the way women engaged with grassroots Australian football 'on the ground'. The first author was part of a grassroots Australian football club in the Hunter and Central Coast region, an area where the sport had not been previously popular and had not been available to women and gender diverse people. The second author is an established sport scholar who had been researching AFLW during that time.

Data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with participants (n=11) between the ages of 18 and 30. Like much work on women's participation in emerging contact sport cultures (for example, Fuchs and Le Hénaff, 2014; Hardy, 2015) our sample was small, however, as Crouch and McKenzie (2006, 496) argue, small scale projects can be 'the way in which analytic, inductive, exploratory studies are *best* done'. The interviews commenced in early 2019 in accordance with the approval from the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee (H-2018-0426). The participants played across four different clubs in the local region, and each had a different history within the code. The variety allowed for a broader range of opinions on their experiences with Australian football and other sports. Although the participants were not specifically asked about their sexuality, four identified as sexually diverse, and four being heterosexual at the time of interviews. The remaining did not disclose. Invitations to participate were posted in local club's Facebook, social media pages and group chats. Individuals who indicated a willingness to participate were contacted by the initial researcher, and given a participant information statement outlining the research, and a consent form. Consenting participants were invited to a semi-structured interview with the initial researcher.

The interviews took place in a face-to-face format, or where more convenient, a telephone interview was used. The interviews ranged between 60 to 90 minutes in length and included questions around sporting background and experience, media influence on women in sport, and women's experience and identity within Australian football. The participants were made aware that the interviews were being recorded prior to their commencements, and that pseudonyms would be used to ensure anonymity. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher before analysis.

As researchers we noticed the growing visibility of diverse sexualities of AFLW players, including in prominent media outlets, as well as in more niche or independent media (see Cherny 2021; Denison 2021). Women's participation in sport has always been something of a paradox in terms of the struggle for legitimacy for women in sport, as they wrestle with cultural norms that position them as outside of sport. We therefore came to the interview data with a sense of curiosity as to how, if at all, the growing popularity of AFLW, together with the challenge the AFLW and its players presented to conservative notions of feminine (hetero)sexuality might be enabling of new forms of subjectivity. That is, what was *both* seeing diverse sexualities in AFLW *and* being part of a sporting culture at grassroots level doing in terms of shifting gender norms? With this question in mind we read through transcripts with an eye to what was emphasised for players surrounding gendered norms. Without prompts, sexuality and stereotypes were often discussed by players when talking about gendered expectations, demonstrating a perceived link between gender, women's sport, and sexuality.

Findings

Shaping a new cultural space: locker rooms, pubs and comradery

A key aspect of women's football experience in Newcastle was the social realm of sport that they had not been exposed to in previous codes. The women noted that Australian football had a community feel, rather than just a weekend sport. This involved: training more frequently (including with the men's teams); engaging with the entire club and not just teammates; social bonding at the sponsor pub; locker room chants; and group chats. The participants discussed the way that Australian football differed from the sports that they have been previously involved in.

I thought the culture was really strong. And being a part of a club instead of an individual team. You would never see women training with the men when I played league. (Brianna, 2019)

This opinion was common amongst participants:

I've sort of found that with AFL, it's more of a team. And you do things on the weekend and outside, and everybody gets around each other. Whereas with soccer you play your game and that's it. It wasn't really like a family. I guess [soccer is] less of a community than AFL. (Mikayla, 2019)

.. I feel like in basketball everyone keeps to their teams. You're sort of like a nobody. Whereas I feel like in AFL, you do get talked about.. Like I feel like, you get to know people even when you don't mean to. So I feel like AFL is much nicer. That's the only difference. (Beth, 2019)

The sense of comradery was a key reason that the women enjoyed Australian football over other codes. It is an experience that they have not been exposed to throughout other sports, and has previously remained associated with men's sports. The relationship with the broader club culture rather than just that of a team is paramount to understanding the blurring of gendered norms and sexualities in these spaces. The participants who have previously played male-dominated sports

(such as league as mentioned by Brianna), believed that Australian football was different in that the men's and women's team trained and bonded together.

Locker room chants adhere to the traditional formulations of hegemonic masculinity (Wellard 2016) and exaggerated displays of aggression associated with masculinity have become the expected norm within sport through repetitive performance (Wellard 2016). It was apparent that the women were performing these bodily displays of 'masculinity' in a way they had not felt able to do in previous codes or sporting environments. In their footy clubs they were encouraged to enact this comradery as part of their role as 'members'. Singing club songs after a win and attending the sponsor pubs are all considered necessary components of participation. Research has explored the way that women adopt and adapt traditionally male-club songs in codes such as rugby union as a site of resistance and expression of sexuality (see Wheatley 1994). The social comradery of locker room chants and activities outside of game time was considered an important and unique aspect of the football experience for our participants as outlined by Karly:

There is a social realm that follows after a game with footy, like we'd go and have beers, the locker room chants and I just feel like there's more of a social feel to it. Netball didn't have that drinking culture attached. Obviously there's a huge drinking culture attached to all footy codes. (Karly, 2019)

The club song in Australian football is generally sung the same by the men and women's teams, showing a sense of unitedness under one club banner, blurring and combining cultural markers and spaces. The social aspect in accordance to space and community has had a profound impact on women, where they felt they could be themselves and explore gendered roles and identity.

However, despite previous work that signified locker room chants (and other locker room behaviour) as masculine and at times threatening to women and non-heteronormative men

(Herrick and Duncan 2020), it was apparent that these displays were not merely adopted from the men, but had been adapted in a way that was their own (see also Choi et al. 2017 on older women in softball). When categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’ bodily displays are intercepted and used in a way that is not consistent with traditional modes of enacting gender, performance within normative discourse is challenged (Butler 1999, 12). As women begin to fill the spaces of club culture, they begin to challenge what is accepted as ‘reality’ in terms of gendered expression and behaviour. The sport-sexuality-assemblage was being reconfigured in these spaces and notions of masculinity and femininity, once so ‘fixed’ in the AFL context, was opened up to change and productive forms of subjectivity for the women involved.

I feel as though I'm a different type of person. Not as in I've been changed, but I'm allowed to be more who I am. More comfortable. Everyone is so easy going. And I don't know, AFL is just more of a community than what the other sports I played have been. (Amanda, 2019)

Access to these sporting environments allowed women to exert their own forms of expression in a space from which they have traditionally been excluded. One participant explained that while at first she found these displays “intimidating”, she eventually began to feel relaxed in the environment:

I found it really intimidating at first because I've played hockey, where you're...comparatively [to AFL] quiet and silent during training and during game. Like, I found all the yelling and the backslapping and the positiveness very intimidating. No, but it's really nice. And I've gotten used to it. It's really nice. (Issy, 2019)

While they have been historically restricted by gendered expectations, Australian football has provided women with a sense of confidence and comfort in displaying these traits.

The acceptance of women in these previously male-dominated spaces has led to a sense of inclusion beyond just the sporting ground. Participants spoke of the sudden inclusion into office conversations by their male colleagues, which highlights the expansion into new spaces. Karly discussed the way that fellow staff members would always ask about her game on the weekend, 'It's always a Monday morning conversation. It's really exciting to share and be a part of'. Karly went on to acknowledge that she never experienced this when she played netball. This demonstrates a new level of social inclusion and acceptance into the realm of sport, however it is still bound by masculine discourse, where AFL is sociable as it correlates to male tastes, while netball is still associated with women, so does not typically engender interest and has been considered an 'inferior' version of men's sport (ie. Basketball; Tagg 2018, 1401).

The AFLW has challenged social stigma and brought women and gender diverse people into broader sporting conversations. This was particularly evident during the interviews as the participants believed that women and women's sport was being perceived more 'positively' by men, and as non-cis-men, were beginning to feel accepted into a previously male-only space. The shift in gendered performance against expected discourses is a reflection of self-acceptance and comfort in the social settings of a sporting environment. The way that women react to these sporting spaces will depend on the way their cultural and social experiences have shaped their gendered habitus (Thorpe 2009, 501). Some of the participants enjoyed the opportunity to prove they were 'not as fragile' as they look:

I like showing people that I'm not as fragile as what I might look or what I should be according to the stereotypes. Yeah, I enjoy it. Yeah. And I kind of get a kick from it. Kinda proving someone wrong that, you know, we can do this. And we're actually good at it. (Sam, 2019)

A resistant attitude to gendered expectations was furthered, with Brianna saying:

Being a woman and being very strong, and wanting women to succeed and be treated the exact same as men in anything we do. I want to be in the sport that needs it. (Brianna, 2019)

For Maddy there was a sense of pride and acceptance in their toughness:

I've played with and against [AFLW players]. They've gotten fitter but... it hasn't changed the way I play. I'm still a brut. (Maddy, 2019)

This is consistent with other sporting codes, where women resist gendered norms and heteronormative expectations, and in some cases get joy out of it (Menneson 2012, 8-9; Chase 2006, 241). Similarly, Roy (2013) engages the way bodies are managed by markers of commitment and a manner of pride. The mentioned participants of our study appeared to somewhat negotiate stigma and expectations placed on their bodies with a sense of pride and resistance. Wedgwood (2004) explored similar notions of resistance by school girls in Australian football during in an area where it is considered the dominant code. For our interviewees, this resistive struggle is evident in adulthood while participating in a sport that is non-dominant to the region for the first time a decade later.

Generally, the consensus for the participants was that they made the space work for themselves and felt free to do so with the ongoing shift of gendered boundaries in sport. This was both on the field and after the game in other spaces. For example, one of the ways that some women in our research appear to be resisting normalised gendered discourse is through the adoption of after-game social aspects, such as the 'after party', of which heavy drinking is a part. When asked about how the women were adapting to that culture, Karly responded laughing, 'Oh, I think they are slotting in just fine'. It is evident that women engaging in sport related drinking

culture is a result of complexities beyond simply ‘resisting’ or conforming to gendered roles (Palmer 2015, 484). ‘Drinking culture’ and post-sport activity has historically been associated with men and sport in Australia (Palmer and Toffoletti 2019, 106) and yet the women involved relished this aspect and being included in this culture.

Heavy drinking has been noted as a cultural marker for men in the field of sport (Palmer and Toffoletti 2019, 107). However, as more women and gender diverse people are becoming involved in these spaces, it is apparent that drinking culture is also becoming a normative cultural practice. Research into this area has offered mixed explanations for this, with some finding that women in ‘masculine’ sports drink to find an identity associated with that code, while more recent work argues that it is not an attempt to ‘emulate’ males in sport (Palmer and Toffoletti 2019, 110). Pubs can be considered an affective and political space, where signs and markers serve as notions of particular behaviours that are acceptable in that site (van Ingen 2003, 203). The participants in this study appeared to perform in accordance to those spatial markers, linking comradeship, chants and drinking. As markers within pubs and drinking spaces have been developed in accordance to men’s behaviour, the introduction of women and gender diverse people into these spaces begins to blur gendered and heteronormative expectations through bodily performance. Engaging in club songs have the ability to challenge heteronormative discourse (Wheatley 1994), and while the songs in Australian football are not adapted for women, the act of performance in the previously male-only space creates shift in expected discourse.

Similar to the argument made by Palmer (2015), we note that engagement in drinking culture is a multifaceted and complex performance. Participants in our research addressed the connection between sport and alcohol, which stems from their childhood and consumption of sports (for

example, NRL stars sculling or spraying beer after winning Grand Finals). However, it was not until they participated in previously male-dominated sports did they start engaging with alcohol heavily as a specific social component of that code. Generally, for the participants it was heavily associated with and accepted as the code's comradery and social setting.

In this way women and gender diverse people's entrée to Australian football in Newcastle, including actively embracing and enjoying the aggression of the field, and the spaces such as clubs and pubs, deterritorialize sexuality, work to skew and re-shape traditional forms of heteronormativity that dominated prior to women and gender diverse people engaging in contact sports.

Stigma, belonging and sexuality

While the participants believe that perceptions around women footballers and athletes are improving, they suggest that stereotypes around gender and sexuality remain. When asked about these assumptions, most of the women experienced masculine or queer epithets aimed at them.

You're seen as masculine, which can be frowned upon. You get called lesbians, even if you're not a lesbian, or get called a boy. Older men say, 'that's a boy's sport'. (Sam, 2019)

This theme remained strong with participants.

Yeah I've got a lot of different reactions when I say I play AFL compared to when I said that I was playing netball. Yeah, a lot of stereotypes... So I'm either heaps physical, or you know, just heaps rough, whereas with netball I never got that assumption. They assume we are all part of the [LGBTIQ+] community. Or really loud mouthed. Or really rough. And some just assume we are like boys... It makes me angry. (Amanda, 2019)

There is then a complex relation between being *more accepted* (as noted above) by others because of participation in Australian football, but also further marginalised as assumptions of non-heterosexuality become the norm. Research has long documented the ways women who pursue 'non-traditional' career or leisure pursuits are posited masculine or queer (e.g. Women in soccer being associated as 'butch' or 'lesbian' for decades; Caudwell 1999). Women in male-dominated spaces are pressed with the issue when attempting to acquire status, for example the 'jokes' made by Australia's first female Prime Minister Julia Gillard and questions of her male partner's sexuality (Murphy 2013). And so women face a conundrum. If they display feminine traits they risk not being taken seriously, if they perform bodily displays associated with masculinity they lose expected femininity (Thorpe 2009, 495).

Femininity as a form of capital is particularly complex in the field of sport (Thorpe 2009, 495). Traditionally women have been expected to represent heteronormative femininity while participating in sport, however, doing this contradicts the respected performance of masculinity in sport (Thorpe 2009, 495). Through exposure and repetitive performances, the black and white nature of women in sport is being blurred. As Bruce (2016) argues, the increasing visibility and diversity in women's sporting media is potentially allowing for a new form of femininity to emerge with focus on strength and physicality. Research has explored the way that women negotiate strength as a part of their feminine practice rather than necessarily one or the other (See Olive 2013). This further strengthens the argument that the illusion of the sport is being struggled over, with women challenging the traditional governing norms (Threadgold 2018, 35).

These constructions of femininity are traditionally valued in comparison to that of masculinity through a 'naturalised' performance of gender (Butler 1999). However, the women in this study were blurring these boundaries, and some reported resisting gendered expectations as a result.

Women appeared to be challenging the confirmative nature of both masculinity and femininity, which limited them and shaped their experiences through their youth. It can be argued that depending on the participating code and the dispositions acquired through childhood, there is growing room for diversity in gendered performance throughout the field of sport (Mennesson 2012, 9).

Two queer-identifying participants said they believe the stereotype to be fact.

Of course there is still a culture with stigma attached to it. They think if you play soccer or AFL that you're a lesbian because of it. The thing is, numbers do suggest that there is a higher population of, I guess, gay and lesbian culture within female sports. That stigma is actually true. It's not meant to be derogatory, people just attach that stereotype because it is a true stereotype. (Karly, 2019)

Upon discussing this further with participants it became evident that for some these previously male-dominated sporting spaces provided an environment where LGBTQI+ individuals felt a sense of belonging.

It is quite dominated by gay women, and I think that's just because it's where we fit in the most too. (Maddy, 2019)

Maddy went on to discuss her experience of being a gay woman and coming to terms with that as a teenager through Australian football:

The girls I played with at the time were amazing like, they were all openly gay, happy, and didn't give a shit. I knew that could easily be me but I didn't come from a background that was supportive of that. The whole athletic side of it pushed aside, just the culture of compassion and understanding, like your mate having your back. It was an awesome feeling. Like that was such an awesome feeling for me. I didn't get that in any other sport. (Maddy, 2019)

For Maddy, Australian football has provided an inclusive space for masculine, queer women. This is consistent with other studies of women in Australian football who do not fit into heteronormative or queer stereotypes but feel as though they fit perfectly within a football setting (Sanders 2019, 11). That many AFLW players were in relationships with women, and defied heteronormativity, was also addressed by Maddy:

..I think that the best thing that the AFL and the women's has done on social media is not put it out there as they are all gay. Most of them are. But it's not out there as, 'they are all this and they are all that'. ..I think the media do it well too.. So they are just like 'oh that's her wife'. You know? It's more like, 'we don't give a shit if it's your wife or your husband, it's your family, and you're getting paid to play a sport'. (Maddy, 2019)

Athletes from the AFLW being shown with their wives and children like 'it's no big deal' is giving exposure to these relationships and having a positive impact on fans from similar groups. The lack of queer representation in the media can historically be understood as erasure through omission and yet the gender and sexuality complexities in sports like Australian football challenge heteronormative displays on the field and beyond, providing a new cultural space for players and spectators of the sport.

While women's Australian football is not dominated by heteronormativity, it is not necessarily dominated by queerness either and provides a space to engage with cultural, social and political issues (Sanders 2019, 15). This was reflected in the interviews with a distribution of hetero and non-heterosexual participants. The growth of women in football will carry a wave of exposure and representation of bodies that challenge norms and heteronormativity (Sanders 2019, 15). As highlighted by participants within this study, the media coverage of such bodies produces idols

that are important to shaping identity, as well as producing and reproducing bodily displays of gender. This has already been noticed by queer women who have shaped their identity and found a sense of belonging in Australian football.

For some, the outcomes of blending heteronormativity and queer environments and stereotypes were blurred. One heterosexual-identifying participant discussed the way she feels perceived by others for playing sport,

With those two sports [Soccer and Rugby], like I think a lot of people are like, I think they get a shock if there's someone that's not a lesbian or anything like that? Or not even bisexual. Like I see it... They're just like oh my god, what? So I think it is a massive stereotype.

I would say it's a bit of a stereotype with women's AFL. I'd made jokes when I was talking about, hopefully one day, the prospect of playing AFLW. I was like, 'Oh, I'm gonna marry [a male AFL player]'. And [my mate] was like, 'You do realize if you're playing AFLW, most of the guys are gonna [sic] think you're a lesbian?' Yeah. So, I kind of do turn a blind eye to it. (Ash, 2019)

Further issues surrounding heterosexuality were raised with Ash discussing how she is viewed when participating in sport by the men in her club.

I feel like sometimes they either see you as a lesbian, or as like, a potential bang. Like you're an attainable goal because you're not a lesbian. So I think that's a big problem. I consider myself like I'm one of the boys. I just want to be one of the boys.

Yeah, a lot of the time with women's sport and just in general I actually have a lot more male friends than I do female friends because yeah, for me, I'm just like, so much less drama so much less bullshit. I prefer that environment. I prefer to go for a kick than to go get my nails done and shit like that. For me, I was like, 'Oh, I'm one of the boys'. But at the same time, I kind of felt like these boys were just mates with me because they're like,

oh she's straight I can bang her. And that's a bit shit. (Ash, 2019)

This suggests that the sexualisation of women athletes remains apparent in grassroots football, despite its status as a space where heterosexuality is problematized. Sexist attitudes are so deeply embedded within the history of sport, they often go unnoticed (Fink 2014, 337). This can be attributed to the fact that sport and sport media work as an authoritative figure in producing hegemonic masculinity (Fink 2014, 337). These beliefs act in a way that places men in a position of power, and women in a subordinate and sexualised position. Although this has been challenged by the introduction of women into these sporting spaces, power structures that position women in this frame remain as a 'natural' part of sport.

Ash went on to say that it negatively effects the way that she approaches sport. Although she loves learning skills from the men in the club, these issues led her to be a bit 'standoffish' when it comes to spending time having a kick with some of the men.

I think it does definitely affect the way you approach sport in a club. I liked hanging out with the boys. These guys have played footy their whole lives and they can give you tips... I feel like it would be easier to be a lesbian in a sporting environment because I'm like... Genuinely wondering if these people want to be my mates? ... Like, what is their intention here? (Ash, 2019)

For Ash, her lived experience has developed a disposition where they are wary of men's intentions towards her, built on the idea that men only usually display value towards women through sexual interest. This experience further demonstrate the complexities of femininity as a form of capital as described by Thorpe (2009, 45) and the reconceptualization of the sport-sexuality-assemblage as a productive way of incorporating these varying complexities. Those that display more masculine traits within sport can be subject to derogatory stereotypes, while

those who fit within heteronormative images of femininity, face the possibility of not being taken seriously as an athlete and being seen as a sexual object. This has shaped Ash's experience in the sport, and influences the way that she engages with her club mates. This limits her ability to grow and learn skills from some of the male players and in turn, limits her investment in the future of the game.

A Developing Space: Representation and Identity in Future Sporting Spaces

The views held by the participants on the future of women's sports is ultimately hopeful and positive. While issues surrounding inequalities were addressed, most believed these gaps would reduce with time. The participants have high expectations and hopes when it comes to the future of women's Australian football. It is evident that they believe that their presence is growing in the field and bringing a lot of changes in accordance with the occupying of the space. Amanda believes that social stereotypes will change in the future, saying, 'I think that [in the future] people won't be shocked when I turn around and say that I play AFL. It'll just be a normal thing', demonstrating the changing face of gendered expression and sexual identities within sporting spaces.

This can be extended to their perceptions of women at the professional level sport. They believe that ultimately the profession will grow and develop, producing opportunities that have not existed in the past. Maddy, who has high hopes for the future of women's sport, expresses this:

Since the AFLW has kicked off I don't even watch the men's really. I always just wanted to watch somebody that represents me in a sport I love and now I've got that. (Maddy, 2019)

This illustrates the way that coverage of women's sport produces visibility to bodies that work to create opportunities for women to reimagine and engage. Although they identified some negative reactions to women's sport being televised, overall they believe that the way the public view professional sportswomen is improving. With that improvement comes a sense of pride for the women, reinforcing their positive experience within the code and the developing space of women's sports.

Discussion and conclusion

The relationship between space and sexuality in sport has been somewhat neglected and it was to this lacuna that this article makes its key contribution. Spaces such as locker rooms, club houses and pubs have been the site of male sporting sociality for a long time. While there is existing research of women entering male-dominated sporting spaces for the first time (see Chase 2006 on women's bodies in rugby union), for the participants in this study, Australian football is unique in providing a club culture where (predominately hetero) men, (hetero and non-hetero) women and gender diverse people are encouraged to share space and interact during training, before and after games. The shared space encourages the coming together of different expressions of sexuality (predominately hetero men and sexually diverse women) and blurs what is accepted as normal bodily performances of masculinity and femininity. Women and gender diverse people's entrée into these spaces has, as the findings above demonstrate, shifted the sport-sexuality-assemblage in important ways. Through conceptualising sexuality as part of a broader sport-sexuality-assemblage, we can continue to work through the complexities of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' and the ways these can enable or impede women's pathways through sports such as Australian football.

Sexuality in the social sciences has often been focused on how humans interact with the physical world strictly through a *cultural context* (Hird 2004, 224). In drawing on insights from New materialisms, we can better conceive of sexuality as part of a broader assemblage of animate and inanimate components (including spaces) that work together to create reality and the world, ultimately de-privileging human agency as the sole focus of social enquiry (Fox and Alldred 2015, 399). In this way we can understand the cultural markers as dictated by social spaces such as pubs and locker rooms, and the way that sexuality is enacted within these sites. Instead of thinking of the human as the locus of agency, exerting themselves within space, we can reconfigure this conception and focus instead on the networks of ‘things’ both human and non-human and the relationships between these things (Fox and Alldred 2015). By examining beyond just a humanist approach, there is the opportunity to understand ontology past the limitations of the body, and explore non-human components of what shapes, influences and reacts to bodily capacities and sexualities (Fox and Alldred 2013, 770). Sport, and in particular contact sport such as Australian football, is an ideal context to apply these ideas to better understand the multiscale changes to sexuality and gender that are occurring in geographically distinct spaces. Through the conceptualization of the ‘sport-sexuality-assemblage’ we can account for the relations of desire for women and gender diverse people in sport spaces as fluid and contingent. For the participants, opportunity for various expressions of gender and sexuality in a way that feel naturalised arose in sporting spaces.

Australian football provided a sense of community and a social realm that was not limited to just a weekend sport. Typically, this kind of comradeship has been associated with men in sport, however, women have now adopted these traits such as locker room chants and consuming alcohol after a match. Generally, the engagement with this social realm has provided a sense of

comfort and belonging for the women. This could be extended to sexuality and queerness, where some women would embrace the stereotypes around women's sport as 'true' and discussed the way this provided a safe space of acceptance. Women's football is not dominated by queerness, nor is it dominated by heteronormativity. It provides a cultural space of different sexualities, displays associated with masculinity *and* femininity that challenge established norms and barriers to women in sport. The embodiment of masculinity and femininity in Australian football sporting spaces (club houses, locker rooms and fields) is supported by/supports the increasing media exposure of varied gendered performances and sexualities through the highly visible AFLW (see Denison 2021). This is especially the case when compared to men's AFL, where there is still no documented cases of a homosexual male player, with heteronormativity still dominating the scene (see Denison 2021).

Despite the opportunities for opening up the sexuality-assemblage in sport spaces, there are still struggles to address for feminine, heterosexual participants, who have their own femininity challenged by stereotypes, with one participant facing issues of being perceived of as a 'target' by men in her club. This limits the way that women can participate within those spaces and presents a barrier to participation and also development of sportswomen from amateur to elite pathways. However, the experience within this developing space is uplifting for women in the code, consistent with the positive and hopeful views on the future of women's sport and media coverage. So while for some, sport opens an opportunity to challenge gendered and sexuality expectations, it can work as a limitation or barrier for others.

The sporting environment, including locker rooms, clubhouses, and fields, as well as mediated spaces such television and social media, interact with sexuality in particular ways that are sometimes hard to describe. These interactions are the focus of this article, examining how

women's entrée and embeddedness in 'footy culture', including the club houses, alcohol consumption and field, assemble to re-configure sexuality beyond the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1999) and enable women opportunities to orient themselves differently to team contact sport.

Gendered performance is challenged when categories of masculine and feminine displays are acted out in a manner that is not consistent with traditional normative practice (Butler 1999, 12). The women in this research consistently challenge accepted notions of gendered expression and behaviour. These bodily displays are acted out in relation to the space in which they take place, absorb the spatial elements of their surroundings, while shaping the space itself. Pubs, locker rooms and club/football culture are spaces where women feel comfortable to exhibit their gender expression and sexuality. These spaces can encourage and provide opportunity for women to challenge binary expectations through comradery and acceptance of masculine bodily displays in conjunction with the normalization of non-heterosexuality through visibility at the professional level.

Australian football club culture in the Hunter region offers opportunity that brings men, women and gender diverse people together to share space and cultural practice. While there is no doubt that division still exists, there is evidence of a blurring of non-hetero and heteronormative bodily performances and expectations at grassroots level throughout the region. Women and gender diverse people, media, spatiality and the sporting landscape offers thought-provoking (and warranted) research opportunities to challenge the way that we accept bodily displays of gender and performance.

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A note from the Authors: We use the word “women” frequently throughout this paper. This predominately refers to women’s competitions as labelled by the leagues that they operate in. The recruitment of participants involved “women-identifying” individuals. We acknowledge the spectrum of gendered identities that participate in “women’s” leagues have faced similar exclusions, and warrant research in this area. This was out of the scope for data collection by the first author, but will be considered thoroughly in future projects. We have used the wording “gender diverse” to include non-binary, gender fluid and transgender people who too, have traditionally been excluded from these spaces. We acknowledge that this does not include everybody who sits outside of the description of cisgender men.

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