

“If you jump up and down, Balotelli dies”ⁱ: Racism and player abuse in Italian football.

Italian football has been in crisis for a number of years as global transformations and internal politics have manifested themselves in corruption, fan violence and financial insecurity. In addition to these, there has also been an increase in racism on the terraces as increased global migration has altered the demographics of cities across the peninsula. Although racism is widespread across many ethnic groups, African footballers in particular have become the symbolic objects of abuse from rival supporters. One footballer in particular has been constructed as an important symbol of this increased global migration; Mario Balotelli. As the son of Ghanaian immigrants, but raised as an Italian by adoptive parents, Balotelli symbolises the transformations within Italy as it comes to terms with its contemporary multi-culturalism. Through analysis of the comments posted on internet forums by fans, this article demonstrates the how inter-club rivalry is fuelling player abuse and racism.

Key Words: Italian Football; Globalisation; Racism; Player Abuse; Mario Balotelli

After Mario Balotelli scored the first goal in Manchester City’s 6-1 victory over their city rivals Manchester United, the striker stood still, looked to the crowd and calmly lifted his jersey over his head; on a T-shirt underneath a message read, “Why always me?”. The slogan was not referring to his exploits on the pitch or his goal-scoring prowess, but intimated towards the numerous media stories centred on the Italian striker.ⁱⁱ Two days prior to the 2011 Manchester derby, the fire brigade was called to his home where some friends had discharged fireworks from his bathroom window which then started a fire (Taylor, 2011). This incident was not unique. During his first season in English football he has been the subject of a number of media stories. On separate occasions he has allegedly been fined for throwing darts in the direction of a fellow player (Herbert, 2011), having a fight with a team-mate (Taylor, 2010) and accruing various driving offences (Barnes, 2011). Despite these well publicised problems, Balotelli has not been the subject of widespread abuse in England. Even after scoring in the Manchester derby, the fans did not target him. This contrasts with the start of Balotelli’s career in Italy. Rival supporters have chanted various anti-Balotelli songs, including the one from the title of this article: “if you jump up and down, Balotelli dies”. As the son of Ghanaian immigrants, his ethnicity has been incorporated into other abusive chants, including “There are no black Italians” and monkey noises. This abuse shows that Balotelli has become a symbol of Italy’s new multi-ethnic identity, and simultaneously provides an opportunity to reject this identity. Through the abuse targeted at one player, it is possible to understand the wider cultural factors that structure racial abuse.

Back et al argue that, “racism is inherently a complex and changing ideology that needs to be situated in specific social and political environments” (Back et al., 2001a: 2). These specific political and social contexts are important when attempting to understand racist abuse. There is a growing body of literature analysing the role of sport within the articulations of race (Carrington and McDonald, 2001, Carrington, 2010, Burdsey, 2011, Long et al., 2010). This research, however, has been predominantly focused on Britain and North America. Burdsey acknowledges this aspect in the focus of British and Irish sport within his edited volume (Burdsey, 2011). Indeed, Carrington's focus is overwhelmingly on the 'black Atlantic' and post/colonialism (Carrington, 2010), which does not take into account countries that are not part of an explicit colonial legacy, of which Italy and Eastern Europe are examples. Within Italy specifically, there has been some research into the racism that emerged in the stadiums during the 1980s (Podaliri and Balestri, 1998, Testa and Armstrong, 2010). However, aside from some notable exceptions within social history (Foot, 2006, Martin, 2011, Valeri, 2006), there has been

little sociological work on the impact of a black Italian footballer and how fans have treated these athletes. Despite these differences, however, certain similarities remain. Race is tied to national culture and is used to exclude membership of those deemed as outsiders.

In order to understand the abuse directed at Mario Balotelli, social networking sites were used to expand and illustrate the range and type of abuse. As Nowell-Smith (1979) has argued, football does not just take place on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, but lives in the conversations of enthusiasts throughout the week. These conversations take place in pubs, workplaces and supporters' clubs and help shape fans' understandings of the match, players and rival supporters. Social media provide a new medium with which to articulate these opinions, even though they represent a restricted demographic (Williams, 2008). The internet permits active user engagement (Lindlof and Shatzer, 1998); participants incorporate the emotion of the stadium and rearticulate their interactions virtually. As Ruddock (2005: 378) argues, football forums provide "represent strategies and vocabularies that material fans use in negotiating football's cultural politics, particularly in these cases around race class and gender". Their views are not modulated to reflect the perceived reception by an ethnographer or interviewer, but placed into public to air a grievance and articulate their identity. Millward (2009) reinforces this through his analysis of racism on e-zines. Messageboards and forums provide wide-ranging discourse and narratives "at the very moment it is produced" which can be analysed for underlying notions of identity (Millward, 2008). For this article, content analysis of Facebook pages directed against Balotelli, and Juventus forums of juvefc and juventusfans, provide the underlying data. The analysis also incorporates a press statement issued by the leading ultras group of Juventus, the *Drughbi*.ⁱⁱⁱ This statement presents the sentiments of the leading masculine fan-groups and helps articulate the meanings behind the abuse.

This article seeks to incorporate the new academic work that has been undertaken in Britain with an analysis of how some football fans in Italy have received Mario Balotelli, and how their treatment of this player symbolises a wider social dynamic and perceived challenge to national and team identity. Initially this article will place racism into its Italian context, before assessing the contemporary literature on racism in sport that has originated from Britain in order to assess the wider structural issues that are operating. In order to understand how racism is articulated at the micro level, the work of Back et al will be discussed, and will form the theoretical basis for the majority of the article. As the argument suggests that Mario Balotelli has become a symbol for a new Italy, and that this is challenging some groups' conception of national racial identity, a section on the player will follow. This is also important, as the introduction suggested, because the player is not an innocent player within this construction. This will be followed by a section on Italian fan culture which will unpick the various allegations targeted at Balotelli and highlight the complex inter-club dynamics that seek to create a hierarchy of symbols, of which race is a major factor. Finally, the complex relationship between nationality and race will be demonstrated in the supporters' abuse.

Racism in Football: The Italian Context

Historically, Italy has been a nation of emigration with two significant periods (mainly from the impoverished south) occurring after unification in 1861 and after World War II. Furthermore, the post-war economic 'Miracle' which took place in the North of Italy saw workers leaving the South to work in the prosperous cities of Milan and Turin.

Globalisation of migration has restructured migration networks (Castles, 1993). Migration from outside of Italy has challenged traditional perceptions. Initially Southerners arrived through defined channels and into specific spaces, namely the train station. Foreign migrants have not followed such clear migratory routes and are viewed as uncontrolled (Foot, 2001). Consequently, many foreign migrants work outside of the authorities and are not officially recognised. These *clandestini* are both invisible and visible (Foot, 2001). They are highly visible in public spaces, often selling contraband, but are invisible to the authorities. Alternatively, many immigrants work in low paid primary industries such as fruit and vegetable picking which are shunned by Italians. When combined with a falling birth rate this ensures that migrants are “needed but not welcome... there is a contradiction between their presence as economic actors and the undesirability of their social presence” (Zolberg cited in Foot, 2001: 70). Migrants from Eastern Europe and Africa, in particular, face discrimination and violence. Roma settlements were attacked in Rome and Naples in 2008, while in Foggia a bus service was established which effectively was only to be used by immigrants (Russo, 2009, McDougall, 2008). At the end of 2009, the council of Coccaglio, near Balotelli’s home town of Brescia, began a systematic removal of illegal immigrants (De Riccardis, 2009). A similar event occurred in the southern Italian town of Rosarno in 2010 when Italians fired air rifles at African immigrants who were employed in fruit picking. This provoked a demonstration from the fruit pickers who had to be escorted from the area for their own safety (Custodero, 2010).^{iv} These global factors are challenging many assumptions and as a result, Mario Balotelli represents a high-profile person from this first generation of Italian ethnic minorities. As Archetti states, “no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives and contradictions” (Archetti, 2001: 154). The paradox of Balotelli is that his presence threatens the monocultural imaginaries of Italy, yet he provides the medium to reiterate them

Mario Balotelli is not the only footballer to have been the target of racist abuse in Italy. Throughout the 1980s, racism became widespread throughout Italian stadiums as many ultras groups became ideologically affiliated to far right politics (Podaliri and Balestri, 1998, Testa and Armstrong, 2010). Racism in the stadium became more marked after the Bosman ruling which ensured that national or club control over players’ contracts was rescinded and players were free to move to any club (Maguire and Stead, 1998, King, 2003, Giulianotti, 1999). The economic (and political) dominance of elite leagues ensured that star players gravitated to the larger clubs in the richest leagues, like Italy. Greater migration of footballers has resulted in players from out-groups becoming the target for abuse. The Romanian international Adrian Mutu, who has played for a number of clubs in Italy, has frequently been subjected to chants of ‘Gypsy’ and has even been described as a “crafty little gypsy” by the president of Palermo, Maurizio Zamparini (Kick It Out, 2007). Likewise, the Japanese star, Shunsuke Nakamura, was subjected to racist abuse whilst playing for Reggina and he suggested that this “probably explains why so few Japanese players have made it here” (Kick It Out, 2008). African players are frequently abused with “buu buu” monkey noises, booed every time they touch the ball or become targets of chanting. In 2005 this led Marco Zoro, the Ivorian striker who was playing for Messina against Inter, to pick up the ball and try to walk off the pitch (Menicucci, 2005). Five years later, the referee stopped and threatened to abandon the game when the Cameroon and Inter player Samuel Eto’o was abused by Cagliari fans (*La Gazzetta dello Sport*, 2010). Finally, AC Milan midfielder Kevin-Prince Boateng received widespread attention when he walked off the pitch in protest after being the victim of racist chanting from Pro Patria supporters during a friendly (Ziegler, 2012). Crucially, these players are outside of the national imagining; Balotelli is Italian.

Race and Racism in Sport

National identity is important when understanding issues of race and ethnicity. Carrington (2010) suggests that the parallel development of sport during the great imperial expansion of nations such as France, Britain and the Netherlands helped shape national identity. For this he illustrates the notion of the 'sporting black Atlantic' to illustrate the role of empire and colonialism in the development of the black sporting body. The problem with focussing on the Atlantic for diasporic movement is that it negates the Mediterranean as a site of migration. And whilst there are significant differences between the movement of black Africans under slavery and the migration of groups such as the Irish and Italians, the latter could also broadly be situated in the wider 'sporting black Atlantic' of migrant populations marshalled towards certain sports, such as boxing. Indeed, in his analysis of 'black Italians', Valeri (2006) highlights how the term originally applied to Italians in the US and Australia. For certain sections of contemporary football fans, the term 'black Italian' is anathema to their cultural understanding of their nation.

The focus on Mario Balotelli demonstrates football's power to exclude along racial lines. This exclusion is often subtle, yet creates structural obstacles for participation. In his edited volume *Race, Ethnicity and Football*, Burdsey (2011) highlights the way that race and nation combine to subtly exclude groups who are considered as being outside the nation. Despite the focus on Britain, Burdsey shows the complexity of race and racism in football. The absence of British Asians in football illustrates the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that help structure racism beyond the obvious abuse that has taken place at football stadiums over the decades. Race and ethnicity are seen as markers of culture that act, as Back et al (2001a) suggest, a 'cultural passport' that permits entry and acceptance within a group. Once again race is seen as a marker of nation. Furthermore, cultural factors such as diet, alcohol consumption and attitude are signified by phenotype (Burdsey, 2007, Back et al., 2001a, King, 2004). Culture becomes a major factor in determining whether individuals and groups are included or excluded. Consequently, cultural racism reflects the construction of insider and outsider groups (Gilroy, 1999, Carrington and McDonald, 2001). Those deemed as outside the national culture are targeted for exclusion and abuse, and often race is used to signify this.

The multifaceted understandings of race and racism have been clearly identified in Long and Spracklen's edited volume (Long et al., 2010). By extending contributions from beyond Britain and North America, they highlight the complexities of the challenge, and reinforce the social construction of race. Indeed, the chapter by Van Sterkenburg (2010) illustrates the fact that the binary constructions of 'black' and 'white', which appear so prevalent in Anglo-American discourse, are not applicable within the Netherlands. Different ethnic groups are distinguished, rather than simply referring to the colour of their skin. Within Italy, national monikers, such as *seneglese* ('Seneglese'), *marocchini* ('Moroccan') and *albanesi* ('Albanian'), are used interchangeably to apply to Black African, North African and Eastern European (Foot, 2001). Yet this does not diminish the way that 'race' is socially constructed by groups. The black-white dualism can still be utilised by groups wishing to differentiate outsiders. Significantly, groups and individuals are racialised to signify their acceptance or exclusion from participation.

Alongside the broader structural aspects of racism in football, it is also important to understand how this abuse becomes articulated and re-articulated. Theoretically this

article draws on the extensive analysis of racism in English football by Back, Crabbe and Solomos and the detailed ethnography of Millwall by Robson (Back et al., 2001a, Robson, 2000). Back et al theoretically draw on the work of Christian Bromberger (1995) whose analysis of the rituals of European football is apposite in the case of Balotelli. Bromberger argues that the rituals surrounding football generate varying forms of identity. These rituals generate a variety of symbols that symbolise the various groups within the stadium. Quite simply we cannot talk in absolutes when we refer to either racism or fan identity. Despite this, some fans talk in cultural or biological absolutes when distinguishing themselves from others. Chants such as “there are no black Italians” makes a clear distinction between biological skin colour and the Italian nation. The abuse of Mario Balotelli symbolises this link between race and nation.

Inter-club rivalry and fan abuse

Racist and xenophobic abuse is situated in a wider hierarchy of abuse. This abuse structures supporters’ identity and differentiates the participant groups. As Back et al argue, denigrating the key symbolic aspects of rivals not only ritually humiliates them, but seeks to reinforce group inclusion. Furthermore, the increasing competition engendered by the globalisation of European football, as King (2003) argues, intensifies status competitions between fan groups. These status competitions are articulated through various insults. In Italy, these insults can take the form of chanting, banners or choreographies. On a spectacular level, during the 2011 Genova derby between Genoa and Sampdoria, Genoese *ultras* presented a banner extending the length of the stand stating that “the city does not want you... go from the city Samp[doria]”. They then proceeded to unfurl a spectacular image of the symbol of Genoa, the Griffon, firing cannonballs at the symbol of Sampdoria, an old sailor.^v Here the clubs are represented by symbolic images which are represented graphically in the choreography. The supporters of Genoa claim to be the legitimate club within the city and undermine their opponents.

Other symbols of the opposition are also defiled as fans seek to assert the superiority and identity over their rivals. Key traditions and historical markers of group identity are challenged. During a match against Pescara on 14th April 2012 the Livorno midfielder Piermario Morosini collapsed and died. This led to a period of mourning at Livorno. His squad number was retired and fans ritually reiterate their admiration for ‘one of their own’. Livorno *ultras* have a strong tradition of Communist politics and consequently also have rivalries with the supporters of clubs with opposing ideological identities, in particular Verona and Lazio (Doidge, 2013). During a match between Verona and Livorno in October 2012, Verona and Livorno supporters performed their rivalry through a variety of chants and gestures. The Livorno fans displayed a banner stating “Card-carrying Fascists serving the State” which not only referred to their opponents’ political persuasion, but also suggested that they were subservient to the state, a suggestion which undermines the collective culture of the *ultras* (Corriere dello Sport, 2012). In response, Verona fans were observed performing Fascist salutes, thus affirming their broader political identity. The Verona supporters then chanted a variety of choruses celebrating the death of Morosini. These chants against the dead player attracted widespread opprobrium, several headlines, and an apology from the mayor of Verona. However, the focus was on the offensive chants against a player, rather than the fascist salutes.

Similar admonishment was directed at the fans of Juventus one month later. During the Turin derby between Juventus and Torino, the supporters of Juventus unfurled an

offensive banner directed at Torino which stated “We of Turin pride and glory, you only a crash” (Vaciago, 2012). This banner referred to the 1949 Superga tragedy which saw the plane carrying the Torino team crash into Mount Superga, east of Turin. The tragedy resulted in the death of the Torino team, which had been dubbed ‘Il Grande Torino’ (“The Great Torino”) after it had broken a number of Italian records, including a record five straight Serie A titles prior to the crash. This tragedy effectively ended Torino as a major force within Italian football (Foot, 2006). In contrast, Juventus is the most successful team in Italian football history, having won twenty-eight scudettos and two European cups. By contrasting the ‘pride and glory’ of Juventus’ success with the tragedy, the ultras of Juventus were reinforcing the sharp contrast between the clubs’ successes. They equated football, and group identity, as reflected in title success. Furthermore, in the banner, the Juventus ultras referred to “We of Turin” which suggested that Juventus was *the* team of the city, and plays on the deliberate ambiguity of ‘Torino’, the name of the city and the name of their opponents. This insult sought not only to attack the most significant moment in their rival’s history, by contrasting it with the success of Juventus, they also sought to suggest that fans of Juventus were more legitimate as they were true *torinese* and that the club had greater legitimacy to be *the* club of Turin. This extended attack also exhibits defensiveness on the part of the Juventus supporters as their club has a national fanbase, whereas the fans of Torino traditionally have resided in the city of Turin. Inter-club rivalry is a complex web of interactions that draw on a variety of cultural symbols.

This wider culture of fan abuse was invoked by members of the *Drughi* ultras groups after abuse aimed at Balotelli. They argued that they regularly faced chants and banners related to the Heysel stadium tragedy where thirty-nine Juventus supporters died after a wall collapsed during the 1985 European Cup Final between Juventus and Liverpool. The *Drughi* state that they were often subjected to chants of “Liverpool, Liverpool” as well as “Heysel”. They also highlight the chants related to an ex-Juventus player, Gaetano Scirea, who was killed in a car crash in Poland whilst on a scouting mission for the Juventus. These episodes, they argue, receive no comment from the media. One online respondent made a similar comment,

because if balotelli is offended there’s a bit of racism?? It would be really stupid because we juventus fans have players like sissoko who is of colour.... However the blue shits [Inter] are not better.... For example when they have insulted with choruses and banners on the deaths at heysel or two young lads [Riccardo Neri and Alessio Ferramosca who] drowned in the lake it is better that they stay quiet (Respondent 22)

This respondent clearly situates this abuse in inter-club rivalry by generically referring to Inter as “blue shits” and highlighting retaliatory insults of Juventus supporters. They also demonstrate that Inter fans chanted the names of two young Juventus supporters, Riccardo Neri and Alessio Ferramosca, who died in a lake. These arguments suggest that player abuse and fan abuse are seen as congruent.

Inter-club rivalry: The Importance of Symbolic Players

Players have become one cultural marker for fan identity. They are totemic symbols that represent their team and stand as an historical marker (Back et al., 2001a, Robson, 2000, Bromberger, 1995, Doidge, 2013). For Robson (2000), symbolic players are constructed in the ritualistic and carnivalesque atmosphere. The carnivalesque also permits the degradation of symbols, especially the ruling elites; as Robson (2000) argues, there is the ‘dark sense of the carnival’ that permits transgressions not permitted outside the carnival.

Symbolic players become valorised and desecrated within the carnivalesque of football. Players who don't conform to the group's conceptions of a symbolic player are challenged. Likewise, star players for opposing teams are profaned to reduce their status. It is in this context that Mario Balotelli has become highly symbolic for rival supporters in Italy due to his actions, colour, nationality and football team. The international composition of football teams has magnified local players who have become inflected with greater significance and meaning in contrast to international players (King, 2003). Yet fans are not homogenous groups. Player-symbols vary depending on the stratification in the stadium. As Bromberger (1995: 297) asserts, "allegiance to certain stars changes according to a complex play of affinities which more or less reflect social identities". At Juventus in the 1980s, workers preferred a physical player like Zbigniew Boniek, whereas managers and executives preferred Michel Platini, the playmaker who controlled the game. At Lazio, Paolo Di Canio represented a player-symbol for sections of the supporters with far right political views. Di Canio publically admired Mussolini, and performed a Fascist salute on a number of occasions. In doing so Di Canio acknowledged, and reflected, the cultural community of the fans. In contrast, the *ultras* of Livorno have a strong Communist identity. Their player-symbol was Cristiano Lucarelli who publicly espoused Communist political ideals and famously took a pay cut to drop a division to play for his hometown club and helped them win promotion back into Serie A. Lucarelli stated that "some players buy themselves a Ferrari or yacht with a billion lire, I just bought myself a Livorno shirt." (Foot, 2006). This reinforced his solidarity with the *ultras*, and differentiated himself from celebrity players who have exploited their bodily capital to win lucrative contracts and endorsements. As the player-symbol of Livorno, however, Lucarelli also attracted derogatory chants from rival supporters; the chant "if you jump..." was also directed at Lucarelli. Whereas Balotelli has attracted much more abuse for the colour of his skin, and his nationality, Lucarelli attracted similar insults for the colour of his politics.

Symbolic players, or players who do not conform to the fans' image, become profane objects open to be defiled. It is in this context that Mario Balotelli has become highly symbolic for rival supporters. His colour, nationality and the team he plays for has transformed Balotelli into something highly symbolic. Racism is specifically denied within these constructions. For example, the president of Juventus' supporters' club of Milan, Domenico Lo Forte, reinforces a common distinction, "Racism is not an issue. The spark is always rivalry. Every team has at least one black player. Picking on a black player is just a way to denigrate the team. I wouldn't give it too much importance" (King, 2003: 232). The *Drughi* reinforce this argument by suggesting that they are happy to have black players in their team:

"We hold to remember that in our 'military row' a certain Momo Sissoko, ebony champion that we hold in our hearts and we are proud that he wears our shirt"

The *Drughi* highlight that the Frenchman Sissoko and other black players who were playing for Inter "were not the object of choruses". The Ghanaian Sulley Muntari, and Parick Viera from France, are players who play a similar role as Sissoko. All three players play a hard-working defensive midfield role that extols hard work over flamboyance. They contrast strongly with the attitude and style of Mario Balotelli. Their style of play and nationalities permit acceptance by the Juventus fans. Most black players within Italy reflect the international migration of global football. These are international professionals who freely move between clubs; their nationality helps constitute them as unthreatening. Within this context they are free to return to their 'home' nation at the end of their

contract or playing career (Back et al., 2001a). Therefore, French players like Sissoko can return to France. Mario Balotelli, in contrast, is Italian and constitutes a threat to the image of Italian national culture.

Mario Balotelli: The Man and the Myth

The abuse levelled at Mario Balotelli is complex. As noted in the introduction to this article, the player has a powerful media presence. For this reason, it is important to present a short biographical section to highlight the complex context of the abuse. Balotelli was born to Ghanaian parents Thomas and Rose Barwuah in Palermo, Sicily. His parents subsequently moved to the opposite end of the country to Brescia, in the province of Lombardy. After developing a life-threatening intestinal illness at the age of two, he was fostered by the Balotelli family his biological parents could not afford to pay for his medical care (Hattenstone et al., 2011). Consequently he has been raised and schooled as a Bresciano and speaks with the local Brescian accent. Under Italian law, foreigners who are born in the country become Italian nationals on their eighteenth birthday.^{vi} Due to this, Balotelli did not represent Italy at schoolboy levels as he was still classed as a Ghanaian immigrant (Novaga, 2006). On acquiring Italian citizenship on his eighteenth birthday, Balotelli announced his intention to play for Italy and was called up for the under-21 squad less than one month later. As a result Balotelli represents a new generation of non-white Italians and his emergence as an Italian football star is challenging some fans acceptance of its multi-ethnic population.

Balotelli represents the various aspects of football fandom; he is both a star and an object of abuse. He is an immensely gifted young footballer who represents the next generation of footballers emerging in Italy. He has been nicknamed ‘Super Mario’ after the Nintendo computer game called ‘Super Mario Brothers’. This game depicts Italian plumbers overcoming obstacles, where the leading protagonist is called Mario. The moniker is apposite in Balotelli’s case as it is apparent that he will have to overcome many obstacles throughout his career. He graduated through Inter’s academy to become their youngest ever first-team player and subsequently represented Italy at under-21 and first-team levels. Indicative of his talent, he was signed by Manchester City in 2010 at the age of twenty for €22 million. At the end of his first season he was man-of-the-match after helping Manchester City to victory in the FA Cup final. This was followed one year later with the instrumental pass that led to Sergio Agüero’s title winning goal in the last minute of the season. The following month he scored the decisive goal against Italy’s arch-rivals, Germany, and celebrated in typically extravagant fashion by removing his shirt and flexing his muscles. This image became an Internet sensation and cemented Balotelli’s place as a football star.

Despite his talent, Balotelli has received widespread criticism. The title of this article comes from one of the chants directed at Balotelli in Italy. Sections of the crowd sing “if you jump up and down, Balotelli dies”, whilst simultaneously jumping up and down. Other chants have focussed on his race, such as ‘black shit’, ‘monkey’, and ‘there are no black Italians’. The focus of this article derives from insults directed at Balotelli during the ‘Derby of Italy’ between Inter and Juventus. Yet he has also received abuse from the fans of other clubs, and followers of the national team. During an international match played in Romania, Balotelli was booed by both sets of supporters (BBC, 2010). Approximately one hundred Italian fans targeted Balotelli throughout the match, as well as holding aloft a banner stating “no to a multi-ethnic national team”. Balotelli was also subject to abuse before an under-21 game in Rome. He was drinking in a bar with friends

when he had bananas thrown at him (*La Gazzetta dello Sport*, 2009). Subsequent postings on internet forums exclaimed 'honour to those who threw bananas'. One respondent stated, "Eat bananas piece of shit!! You must die" (Respondent 28), while another "To the Romans who threw the bananas!!! Rightly!!!!!!!" (Respondent 44). The vitriol of these insults reiterates how Balotelli is seen by sections of Italian supporters. Balotelli responded to this abuse during a match against Roma. After scoring a goal, he stuck his tongue out at the fans.

Balotelli's response to the bananas in Rome helps explain some of the motives for the abuse. As mentioned in the introduction, Balotelli has also attracted media attention for various escapades away from the pitch, such as setting fire to his house with fireworks, having fights with teammates and missing training. He was publicly criticised by his manager at Inter, Jose Mourinho, for his lack of commitment in training. In November 2008 Mourinho, dropped him from the Inter squad, and stated that "I can't accept that [lack of training] from someone who is still a nobody, who hasn't made it yet, who is still a talent with potential. He needs to train harder." (Fifa.com, 2009). Similarly, he was criticised by the coach of the Italian under-21 team, Pierluigi Casiraghi, for missing a training session after oversleeping and missing his flight (Ubha, 2009). This apparent lack of professionalism is given as reasons for the abuse:

it is not a problem of colour balotelli you are a true piece of shit you have not the courage to go to training and also you are a dick to your mates of shit (Respondent 1)

Masculine notions of solidarity and teamwork are introduced to further mark Balotelli. By referring to his "courage", this respondent suggests that Balotelli is not strong enough to work hard in training which undermines his teammates.

Balotelli's perceived lack of professionalism also demonstrates a lack of awareness of his role. The globalisation of football has transformed football and created a group of affluent professional footballers. Fans expect players to be professional. In his deconstruction of the theatre of wrestling, Barthes (1972) highlights the importance of the wrestlers performing the correct role. The wrestlers act good or evil and play to their audience. As Barthes (1972: 16) states, "What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself". Sport reflects the emotions of society that are normally hidden from view; the joy of victory and the despair of defeat. Balotelli does not perform the expected role and this reinforces him as an object of abuse. He has been criticised for not celebrating goals; his response was that "I'm doing my job. When the postman delivers your letter, does he celebrate?" (Hayward, 2012). Yet this does not reflect the passion in the stadium and reinforces him as an outsider.

"There are no black Italians": Race and Nationality

The rituals surrounding football both help to unite and divide. The ritualistic performance of group identity helps reinforce that group's identity. The nature of rituals is their repetition which establishes tradition and longevity. Yet they also distinguish between those participating in the ritual and those who are not. Although participation does not automatically imply acceptance, it does denote inclusion in a very public manner (Rappaport, 1999). More crucially for this article, the intersections of masculine group identity, nation and race are formed and reformed through the performance. As Back et al (2001b: 86) argue,

Sport is a ritual activity in which the relationship between race, nation and inclusion is repeatedly stated and defined, through representations of the 'us' that is manifest between the teams and devoted supporters. Here 'race' and 'nation' function not as given entities but social forms that are staged through 'big games' and repeated sporting dramas. Their form and quality are defined through the performance itself and continuities are established through repetition. So here 'race' is not a given but the process in which 'racial difference' is invoked and connected with issues of identity, entitlement and belonging.

Racial and national difference is used by fans to differentiate themselves from their rivals. Fundamentally, notions of a racially homogenous nation informs fan-groups' conception of themselves. The chants, banners and postings that state that "there are no black Italians" explicitly link skin colour and nationality. Ironically, as Valeri (2006) argues, members of the Italian diaspora were called 'Black Italians' in Australia and the US.

The globalisation of migration has challenged assumptions of cultural and ethnic homogeneity. Back et al (2001a) argue that black foreigners differ from black nationals in that the foreign player can return home after their contract expires. The black national directly challenges this notion and in the case of Balotelli, he is clearly constructed as an African who should return 'home' to Africa despite being born in Italy. Citizenship and nationality are refuted on the basis of Balotelli's 'race':

balotelli return to africa instead of breaking the shit in italy, ugly bastard, tiago [Juventus player from Portugal] has done well and given you the football, in fact he should have broken both your legs, you are no different, ugly shit head (Respondent 12)

Ultimately, the abuse is related to Balotelli's construction as an African, and therefore non-Italian. The respondent exalts a non-Italian of his own team, the Portuguese player Tiago, but decries Balotelli for not being Italian. Tiago, as a European and a Juventus player, is situated above a black Italian of Inter within the fan constructed hierarchy and represents less of a threat to Juventus fans' sense of identity.

The *Drughi* utilise similar symbolic markers to draw reference to Balotelli's ethnicity in order to highlight his otherness. Their press statement did not refer to Mario Balotelli, but 'Mr. Barwuah' which they claimed:

[W]e prefer to call him like this because this is written on his documents, since the last name Balotelli, at least until now, is that of the family that fostered him and not his.

The group clearly de-lineate Balotelli's ethnicity by referring to his biological parents' surname, rather than the name that he has been called for seventeen years. They emphasise his 'un-Italian' name to show that he is not from a 'true' Italian family. This is reinforced at the end of the communication when they state that:

It is not our guilt if Mr Barwuah was born in Italy from non-Italian parents, has been abandoned at a tender age and does not have the complexion of a Swede.

Again, the group draw on cultural references of 'race' by comparing Balotelli's complexion to a Swede. This assumes a homogenous ethnic grouping for Sweden as well as drawing on cultural stereotypes of blonde Scandinavians. This places 'blondeness' at the top of the cultural hierarchy, which sits in sharp contrast to the cultural stereotype of their own Italian ethnicity. By placing 'blondeness' at the cultural apex, the group reinforces Balotelli's 'Otherness' as his name and skin colour render him non-European, and un-Italian. Ultimately, however, they are also placing themselves lower in the hierarchy than 'Swedes', which reiterates the traditional status of Italians within the diaspora (Valeri, 2006).

The international migration of players further marks Balotelli as an Outsider. In keeping with their name, *Internazionale*, Inter have amassed an international squad of players. During the 2009-2010 season Inter had only eight Italians in its squad of thirty players. This fact is merged with the trope of Balotelli's nationality and colour in many comments:

the only italian of inter has black skin (Respondent 6)

inter is a squad of shit....they are all foreigners and the only italian is black (Respondent 21)

Balotelli's colour and nationality help differentiate him within the Inter squad. He represents two facets of Italian nationality and globalisation. Even though his nationality has been explicitly denied by other fans, he remains a key Italian in a squad of foreigners, yet his colour still marks him as a cultural Outsider. This gives Juventus fans the opportunity to denigrate their rivals, as well as the player.

Globalisation has created a paradox in cultural racism. Increased migratory flows of athletes have seen fans confronted with more international players. This has increased exposure to various cultural and national perspectives with which to articulate identities. In this context, certain ethnicities have become valorised. In particular, the black athlete has been constructed as superhuman, which has had a detrimental effect on black success in other sections of society (Hoberman, 1997, Carrington, 2010). Within British football cultural stereotypes of black hyper-masculinity has permitted black males to enter the masculine world of football support and hooliganism (Back et al., 2001a). In contrast, other ethnic groups such as South Asians have become excluded (Burdsey, 2007). Culturally, foreigners can also signify progress. In a port-city like Marseilles, immigrants and foreigners symbolise successes and progress (Bromberger, 1993). Consequently the black male athlete symbolises a threat to rival fans who seek to neuter their effectiveness through abuse. Although Balotelli is seen as an outsider, both racially and professionally, he is still regarded as a threat. The Drughli statement reinforces this:

It is clear that to distract a psychologically weak person, one looks to strike where he suffers the most, in this case, for Mr Barwuah the colour of the skin joined to his origins, meant like conception from two Ghanaian parents, and not Italian, was a way, from all the stadium, in order to try to make him nervous and rendering him innocuous.

They highlight that he is "a psychologically weak person" and therefore less masculine, and repeat his Ghanaian roots. Yet they also concede that he constitutes a threat to their team. They acknowledge that they want to make Balotelli "innocuous" and insult him to

make him nervous. The valorisation of the black male athlete constitutes a threat; yet the image of the black Italian with precocious talent constitutes the antithesis of their symbolic player. Balotelli simultaneously constitutes a threat and a profane object to abuse. In doing so, rival fans both denigrate the player *and* their opponents.

Conclusion

Mario Balotelli has become highly symbolic. He has become a symbol of Italy, Inter and modern football. Carrington highlights how the boxer Jack Johnson both inverted racial logic, and reinforced it by subverting the scripts that normally defined codes of behaviour. “Before Johnson”, Carrington argues, “most black athletes simply followed these permissible scripts that defined their social roles and engaged in cautious forms of interaction and modes of expression. Johnson took back the play book, subverted it, and turned it upside down... He dismantled the racial logic, and added some lines of his own” (Carrington 2010:93). Whilst Johnson struck at the nascent multicultural United States, Balotelli has done something similar in Italy. His character is central to this. Balotelli does not perform the role that is expected of him. He has carved his own niche, which affronts sections of rival fans who expect humility from their football stars, and their immigrants. Paradoxically, Balotelli constitutes a threat to rival supporters who have constructed him a symbol of otherness and un-Italian. As a black Italian, he challenges assumptions about the ethnically homogenous Italian nation. The increased mobility of players has profoundly affected the composition of football teams across Europe. Inter, like their name, are an international team. With few Italian players, Mario Balotelli becomes the most high profile Italian in their team. Yet his ethnicity and professionalism mark him as an outsider. Paradoxically, he remains a threat. In order to intimidate him, certain fans desecrate Balotelli’s masculinity and ethnicity, defile him as a symbol, and attempt to undermine his influence for his team. The cultural context in Manchester contrasts sharply with Milan. Balotelli’s ethnicity is not drawn upon in England. As another international celebrity player, he does not represent a threat to national identity. Abuse directed at Balotelli in England would focus on his symbolic threat to the team.

Player abuse, racism and homophobia can be challenged through understanding inter-club rivalries. There has been clear institutional support to challenge racism in England, but other forms of abuse remain. In contrast, there is no equivalent in Italy of the English Premier League’s ‘Kick It Out’ campaign, either from the Italian FA or the Italian leagues. The Italian FA has fined clubs whose supporters make racist chants, and have banned Juventus supporters from the stadium for one game in April 2009 after anti-Balotelli abuse. They have also taken significant symbolic actions to highlight the abuse, for example after Marco Zoro, the Ivorian striker, threatened to walk off the pitch after being subjected to racist abuse by Inter fans, the Italian FA ordered all the following week’s matches to kick off five minutes late and with players holding “No to Racism” banners. However, this needs to be put into context. In November 2009, the federation fined Juventus €20,000 for the racist abuse; four months later they fined Jose Mourinho, the Inter manager, €40,000 for crossing his hands in a ‘handcuff’ gesture after Inter had two players sent off. Mourinho insinuated that the football authorities were trying to stop Inter winning the title. When allegations of corruption are fined more severely than racist chanting, there is much to be done by the federation. The situation will only be improved through a concerted organised approach from all stakeholders. The experience of Kevin-Prince Boateng in 2012 has demonstrated that Balotelli is not alone and the situation is not improving.

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Endnotes

ⁱ The title is a chant sung by fans: “se saltelli muore balotelli” (“if you jump up and down, Balotelli dies”). Singing fans also jump up and down to create a visual and aural spectacle.

ⁱⁱ In January 2013 Balotelli moved back to Milan to play for Inter’s rivals AC Milan, the team Balotelli supported as a boy.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ultras groups are organised fan-groups that passionately follow their club. They are predominantly masculine, and employ a range of techniques to present their passion. Choreographies are organised for match-days which include fireworks, flags and banners. They have also been known to utilise violence to demonstrate their masculine image. Juventus’ *ultra* group are called the *Drughis* after the ‘droogs’ who were famed for their ultra-violence in Stanley Kubrik’s film *A Clockwork Orange*

^{iv} The situation in Rosarno is complicated by the fact that the fruit farms are under the control of the local *Ndrangheta* (the Calabrian organized crime clans) who employ the cheaper foreign labourers at the expense of local employment.

^v http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_lvUbCPYwc&feature=related

^v <http://www.comune.torino.it/en/papers/italian-citizenship.shtml>

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