

# The Performance: Nativism, belonging, and the confluence of two worlds at the London 2012 Olympic Games

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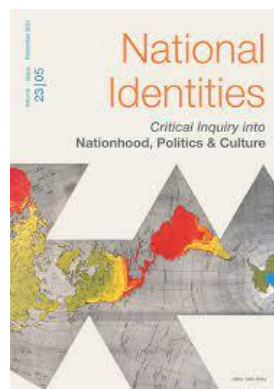
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## **National Identities Conference**

### **The Performance: Nativism, belonging, and the confluence of two worlds at the London 2012 Olympic Games**

#### **Abstract**

The London 2012 Olympics represented to the socio-cultural imagination of the nation, a seminal moment of not simply sporting excellence but of a national arrival, a coming together global showcase of British society and values. Embedded into this mass communicated display of a quintessential variety of British multiculturalism, interminably discussed at the time, was the national discourse of British 'tolerance', formative in shaping notions of national identity. Collectively characterised as 'structures of feeling', an ensemble of mutual social and expressive cultural relations operative in society (Williams, 1978; Williams 1981).

However, existing at the same time and space as this event was a vehement practice of intolerance, which took the form of state sanctioned 'hostile environment' policies, enacted against the same groups who were spearheaded as exemplars of Britishness. Ordained as heralds for the zeitgeist of a new national identity prevalent within society at this moment in national life. Of concern, the UK Government's hostile environment legislation - a cluster of policies set in motion in 2012 - tasked private sector banks, employers, landlords and the non-private sector NHS alongside a host of various intra-and extra-governmental agencies in the enforcement of immigration controls (Akala, 2018; JCWI). This unquestionably resulted in unprecedented state sanctioned abuse of citizen rights (JCWI). Research scholarship accords that the results of these policies were not an accident, but the inevitable consequence of political decisions (Akala, 2018; JCWI, 2023; Wimbush, 2023).

This paper will revisit this conjectural moment in British national life and explore this socio-cultural event through the critical and novel conceptual lens of colourwashing. Thereby problematising related literature that foregrounds the event as a symbol of contemporary unification to give voice to alternative readings (Thomas, & Anthony, 2015). Unpacking this moment to explore why some contributions were deemed inconsequential, discounted, and excluded - their Britishness denied, eviscerating their identity. The paper will seek to discern why those lives were lived in precarity at a moment of symbolic national identity formation that globally displayed 'diversity' as a source of national strength.

**Keywords:** Olympics, National Identity, Britishness, Precarity, Discourse, Belonging, Colourwashing

#### **Biography**

Jay Dunstan is a PhD Doctoral Researcher at the University of East London, based within its school of Arts & Creative Industries (ACI). His research is concerned with critically interrogating ongoing performative discourses around diversity.

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## Introduction

I want to use this introduction to frame the presentation in the preferred context of our remembered heritage. The construction of which forms part of our national identity, recognised as a complexifying, contentious ongoing process with enduring historical nativist dimensions (Jaspal, & Cinnirella, 2012).

National identity is constructed by processes to create our 'narratives of nation' characteristically these are dominant discourses of meaning (Hobsbawm, 1992). The sources of which come from varied aspects of our social life (see, Baena, & Byker, 2014). One such aspect being the events of the London 2012 Olympic Games and 2012 Summer Paralympics. Often displaying discursive fixity in our national memory as residual remnants of resonance today (Vincent, *et al.*, 2017). Processes coalesce through mass-spectacles (Hobsbawm, 1992), exemplified at the games – to form what is also considered to be 'structures of feeling', an ensemble of mutual social and expressive cultural relations operative in society (Williams, 1978; Williams 1981). Such feelings being where the public and the private worlds are bridged and national identity itself is made (Iorwerth, Hardman, & Jones, 2018)

What follows is not to detract from those important events of 2012, they were for many millions of people a unifying and enduring series of weeks in their personal, national and global lives (Thomas, & Anthony 2015). This was certainly the case for me. I, my family and friends were – like many millions – caught-up in the splendour of it all, I too felt a sense of pride and dare I say renewal. In recalling that period, it felt (and yes, I call on our human feelings and emotions here), as if having turned a difficult political and economic corner the UK had arrived.

## 'Our Games'

Indeed, we arrived at this point in 2012, via the games, having exited the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and anti-austerity protests. The Cameron Government had not yet fully swung its wrecking ball through the country (see, North, 2011). We had arrived at some lofty point on the 'Sunlit Uplands', people felt good, the nation felt this too.

In the lead-up to the London 2012 games, collectively we expressed our usual British reservations about the cost of the games, the odd-looking logos, branding and mascots. Not to mention – the perennial preoccupation of these Isles, questioning if the weather would hold. Doubts, and the murmurings of (often) right-wing press began their chipping away op-eds to condemn the games (see, Black, 2015; Vincent, *et al.*, 2018) – at least that was the impression that I had arrived at (being a voracious consumer of media at the time). However, a curious and somewhat uniquely British quirk ensued. The British public took to the games, we learned to love the once maligned characters Wenlock and Mandeville (Vincent, *et al.*, 2018). An organic, authentic momentum was building outside of the stadia and arenas, emanating from our homes and workplaces (Bryant, 2015). In terms of populace wide engagement, an unprecedented 90% of the UK population watched the coverage of the Olympics (IOC, 2012; Olympic World Library, 2013).

I have spent many years of my professional life working alongside Americans. In making a crude distinction, I have found that whilst in America, they very much enjoy things being, let me say 'put together', PR managed, the optics of life. Think here the smile that greets you – close to – wherever one travels in the States, such smile codes being extensively studied (Szarota, 2011). In contrast, (and to generalise again) we Brits look for a form of authenticity – what anthropologist Kate Fox calls the 'grammar' of English behaviour (Fox, 2004). Wherein, our cultural need for the authentic can render our events a tad dour – not to mention rain soaked.

However, the London 2012 Olympic Games and 2012 Summer Paralympics bypassed an all too typical British shortcoming. The games were real, urgent, transformative, agentic, authentic, they spoke to us at a satisfyingly natural level – many of us had thought was lost. The events unified across so many intersections of our embedded subjectivities, speaking of our (imagined) national place in the world (Hobsbawm, 1992; Thomas, & Anthony 2015; Vincent, *et al.*, 2018). British narratives examined from the period discern that this event did indeed foster our pride in being...British, to value our shared multi-ethnic/multi-sectional heritage(s) (Vincent, *et al.*, 2018). The events over that Summer of 2012, created a national zeitgeist picture of Britain that was ours (belonging), it was *everyone's* to enjoy. Wherein, we could share it with the global stage.

### **A World Alongside the World**

I recount the preferred socio-cultural discourse of the games, including my own personal, overwhelmingly positive impression to provide a juxtaposed contrast. A distinction which reveals powerful forces of state sanctioned precarisation. Simultaneously working in parallel to this period in our national life, to include the transformative national identity forming forces abounding from the games. However, in following the philosophical tradition, critique should aim at political emancipation (Gaon, 2024). Therefore, I aim to explicate how monumentalist events obscure the diametric opposite of their explicit and implied national promise of belonging. Empirically, as in the London 2012 Olympics, communities are actively sought and included for the purposes of performativity and symbolic creation in the construction of identities (Ferguson, 2009), aggregated to construct a nativised national identity (Hobsbawm, 1992).

Yet, the material circumstances, the *realpolitik* tells an uncomfortable, altogether different story, one we are obliged to discuss and problematise (Hewitt, 2020). We must explore this area of our national life lest we repeat *again*, the national collective amnesia all too historically prevalent in these Isles (Billig, 2000) – which runs as an accompanying ‘anti-discourse’ alongside our legitimated ‘Britishised’ collective national identity (Ellis, 2001). The other world I wish to present to the conference is the world of the: excluded, marginalised, ‘Othered’ and discounted. And, in a final act by the state, those deported from the national body.

I often speak to fellow PGR colleagues at UEL who, being international students, generally speaking have no idea what Britain was like in the 1970s and 1980s. Why would they? Although, fortuitously I was shielded from much of the effects of this earlier iteration of Britain. However, the sentiments and scars remained on the walls, literally painted on the walls of our physical spaces for all to see. One of the choice epithets from this earlier period was ‘Go Home...’, you can add the N-word or the P-word or the W-word or the Q-word<sup>1</sup> to the end of those daubing’s.

It remains astonishing that HM Government’s Home Office conceptualised, paid for, designed and discharged mobile billboards emblazoned with ‘Go Home’ to various London-wide destinations. Places known to be dense multi-ethnic areas identified as the home boroughs of the Olympics. Heraldng – as the final mopping up of the Olympics had just finished – to ‘Johnny Foreigner’, those that did not ‘fit’ the national body politic, that they should depart. This time with a few sanctioned Pounds Sterling in an often-reluctant recipient’s metaphorical back pocket. The state sanctioned campaign discursively borrowing from the liminality of those aforementioned brick walls. Making perverse use of their crudely painted slogans that dotted our landscape for decades until solvents were produced with sufficient potency and utility to eradicate them, or the walls they defiled cleared to make way for ‘luxury flats’ – the tail end of Labour’s civic rejuvenation.

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<sup>1</sup> This Q-word was discursively and linguistically reclaimed by the early work of critical theorists such as Alan Sinfield, his various collaborators and the transformative work of activists. See, Sinfield, A. (1994) *Cultural Politics - Queer Reading*. (Second Edition). London: Routledge. See, also living heritage (museum sites) such as the Bishopsgate Institute, <https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/>.

Mobile billboard vans being the visual (comical even) manifestation of the hostile environment legislation – a cluster of policies set in motion in 2012 – which tasked private sector banks, employers, landlords, the non-private sector NHS and various intra- and extra-governmental agencies in the enforcement of immigration controls (Akala, 2018; JCWI). This unquestionably resulted in unprecedented state sanctioned abuse of citizen rights (JCWI).<sup>2</sup> The extent of the abuse for example resulting in the Home Secretary at the time misleading Parliament on the existence of ‘deportation targets’ (Hewitt, 2020). Research accords that the results of these policies were not an accident, but the inevitable consequence of political decisions (informing policy), designed to make life intolerable for those without ‘official’ sanctioned documentation (Akala, 2018; JCWI, 2023; Wimbush, 2023). Through the conceptual lens of national identity – with its discourses of values and shared tendencies (Parekh, 2010), it can be evidenced that those whose contributions were deemed inconsequential were discounted and excluded – their Britishness denied (Hewitt, 2020). In essence, we can discern that those lives both were and are lived in precarity, their limits of diversity finalised (Parekh, 2010).

We must remember the state sanctioned ‘hostile environment’, entailing the destruction of so many lives started as our national identity was being re-confirmed in the throes of the 2012 London Olympics. Where a great many British (born and bred) minorities performed for *their* country as their grandparents, uncles, aunts and family were actively being detained and deported. Breaking a long held and acknowledged covenant between the British Empire and her dutiful Colonies and Subjects – the Commonwealth (Hewitt, 2020). In terms of numbers, around 57,000 people were affected by the Windrush scandal, the majority of them elderly, infirm and vulnerable (Hewitt, 2020). Let those points sink in.

The Windrush scandal is a blot on Britain’s socio-political landscape and a repudiation of their ‘sense of fair play’ (Hewitt, 2020: 109).

As scholars working in this domain have made clear the scandal ‘emphasised the seemingly contingent and fragile position of British citizens who were seemingly still constructed as outsiders’ (Back, Keith, Shukra, & Solomos, 2022: 1).

### **Ethereal World**

The London 2012 Olympics affords us the opportunity to see two worlds living alongside one another, the nationally accommodated permissible world juxtaposed against the ethereal world of the excluded (Oonk, 2022). The parallel of this in the physical sciences is known as wave-particle duality, a principle extending to the social world and the world celebrated at that time. Raymond Williams would have characterised this paradoxical arrangement as ‘continuity forged out of repeated spasms of dehiscence’ (Connor, 1998: 2). Following this notion of continuity, precarity is in evidence in the state, regardless of the mass communications performativity of paradoxical expressions of hegemonic solidarity. Irrespective too of the performativity which communicates to our inherent sense of national identity. This is a pivotal substantive point, precaritised people and groups often move into poverty, to occupy the margins of our national life (Rubery, Grimshaw, Keizer, & Johnson, 2018). These forces of precarisation – unleashed in the forming of national identities – further compounds our sense of who constitutes our nationally accepted ‘in’ group and who is ‘out’. This latter grouping becoming at once undeserving of our protection, accommodation and our sustenance (Butler, 2012).

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<sup>2</sup> The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, (JCWI). Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230125231903/https://www.jcwi.org.uk/windrush-scandal-explained>.

Interrogating the literature and my own hypothesis suggests that an inverse mechanism is in action within society. A mechanism vital to the construction of national identity itself. The greater the performativity of events of national unity, belonging and collective identity, the greater the incidence of potentialised exclusion. As evidence and experienced in the polity, over 2012 and subsequent years.

Indeed, this hypothesis of causality has been tested and re-confirmed at the UEFA Euro 2024 football tournament, where precarity has again reasserted itself against an altogether juxtaposed backdrop of performativity. The England team – with a line-up comprising one of, if not, the most diverse England squad of all time reached the penultimate title of ‘Runner-up’ (2<sup>nd</sup> place), the nation’s greatest sporting football accolade since 1966. Less than two weeks later, the English/Farage/Race Riots/Pogroms started. This questions the relationship between mass communicated inclusion as performativity and the *realpolitik* of lives precaritized, removed again from our collective national identity. In this instance via a multi-weeks long carnival of unbridled hate, the difference this time – the state did not legally sanction it. However, the underlying functional mechanism is comparable, if not the same.

### **Mechanisms of National Identity**

Next, I briefly sketch a supporting problematic of how mass spectacles of sport can be ideated as a field (I am proposing here the Bourdieusian notion of field). In conceptualising a Bourdieusian field, it relates to a given sociological space – a specific configuration where the concept of power is emergent and plays out (Collyer, *et al.*, 2015). Field analysis brings quite separate units together to emphasise their relational properties, it is the site of construction for individuals, institutions, and power (Strand, 2001). The utility of Bourdieu’s theoretic framework affords analysis of complex mechanisms including national identity construction operative in the field of global sport.

Again, in brief, various (cultural/economic/social/institutional and so forth) capitals are valued, legitimated and consecrated as symbolic in fields such as global sport. These capitals coalesce and orchestrate to legitimise individuals within the field, conferring to them a nativised national identity. However, in problematising this process, there is in evidence a disconnect between symbolic creation as a field which consecrates national identity formation. The disconnect is demonstrated in the following quotations from notable sports people performing at the highest levels for their countries:

‘When I win, I’m British. When I lose, I’m Jamaican.’<sup>3</sup>

Linford Christie

‘I am an Australian and... I would like to believe that my successes are celebrated by all Australians.’<sup>4</sup>

Cathy Freeman

‘When I win, I’m British. When I lose, I’m Somali.’<sup>5</sup>

Sir Mo Farah

‘If I score, I’m French. And if I don’t score or there are problems, I’m Arab.’<sup>6</sup>

Karim Benzema

The question for future researchers remains: why does this mechanism of national identity affordance break-down and cease to function outside of the sociological field of global sports?

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<sup>3</sup> See, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/athletics/articles/c035805y52mo>.

<sup>4</sup> See, [TOP 25 QUOTES BY CATHY FREEMAN \(of 57\) | A-Z Quotes \(azquotes.com\)](#).

<sup>5</sup> See, [In 'hugely moving' documentary, Olympic gold medallist Mo Farah reveals that he was trafficked to the U.K. | CBC Documentaries](#).

<sup>6</sup> See, [Karim Benzema, a French obsession | Sports | EL PAÍS English \(elpais.com\)](#).

Furthermore, in an age of growing independence movements is the idea of 'British' national identity itself in question?

### Conclusion

In concluding, there appears no facile solution to these contradictions of performance on a global stage, delivering human excellence often by minorities in service of the state. Undoubtedly, these contradictions can be read across into other areas of our shared national socio-cultural life. For example, in the output from the Contemporary Cultural Industries (CCI) which disseminates our mediated life. In this field of mass communications an equivalent is in evidence also (Dunstan, *forthcoming*). In returning, actions which through events such as the Olympic Games provide a substantive positive contribution to our collective national identity on trans-national and global scales. Can be contrasted to the alternate side, constitutive of forces of precarisation – argued to work in tandem to form our national identity. Intuitively, we assume if a quantitative critical mass were achieved in global sporting prowess, then a corner could conceivably be turned disrupting this mechanism. However, empirically, this remains elusive, there is no precedent in history for this optimism<sup>7</sup>, casting doubt on this hypothetical avenue as a possible way forward.

Nevertheless, if we do not, as a nation, come to terms with the differences and wider encompassing reality of what and who constitutes our national identity, consequences are to follow. As we have witnessed in the recent riots the potential of these questions to degrade our total national life will continue unabated. In terms of scale, the recent rioting is considered to be the worst public disorder to hit Britain for 200 years (Batty, & Syal, 2024). One step must be to foster and engage critical dialogue around preferred discourses which formulate our national identity (Bhambra, 2021). In recognising the mechanisms at work – acknowledging the parallelism accompanying national identity construction – represents a formative step in the addressing of these questions. We must cultivate national identity beyond the limits of the symbolic created in sociological fields.

Failure to cultivate an expansive national identity reneges on the promises a modern forward Britain espouses as values, gradually incorporated into our professional and pedagogic spaces (Lander, 2016). The consensus and cohesion underpinning such values Britain will require to progress and thrive in a changing world – a world where power is *returning* East. And, devolving to the Global South (Duggan, Hooijmaaijers, Rewizorski, & Arapova, 2022; Hira, *et al.*, 2022). In response to the Post-Brexit rhetoric of 'Global Britain', if we are to be a part of the world emerging, then our 'Little Insular Englander' approach to national identity (Gilroy, 1992) must cultivate beyond the performativity of global sport to accommodate all of the various embodied differences – regardless of the protestations of (in)cognizant deniers (see, Cummings, 2020).

We will all need these connections of being in the future, not purely for the creation of a 'positive sense of Britishness and inclusion' rather for global connectivity, a vital component to any future successful nation reimagining its sense of national identity in an increasingly changing world (Bhambra, 2021: 407).

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<sup>7</sup> My thoughts here turn to four-time Olympic gold medallist Jesse Owens and his achievements at the 1936 Summer Olympic Games held in Berlin. Despite this achievement, representative of a paradigmatic shift, Jesse returned to the U.S., a nation of segregation and 'Jim Crow Laws' (See, Drake, 2011; Pieper, & Linden, 2020).

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