

‘Isles of Wonder’: Performing the mythopoeia of utopic multi-ethnic Britain

Be not afeard: the Isle is full of noises (The Tempest, Act III)

The modern Olympics Games have always been closely sutured with various historical socio-political-economic trajectories; most recently inextricably tied to the global rhythms and regimes of an expanding media-industrial and deeply militarized complex (see e.g. Andrews, 2006; author a/b; Denzin, 2012). In our present, the Games operates as a highly affective, and extremely public, political, pedagogic, corporate and powerful media spectacle through which to define the parameters of *the* ‘sanctioned’ nation, its citizenry, its politics, the ‘other’, and the geo-political-imperial-military trajectories of the market and the state (author b). Within this paper, the very particular ‘narratives of nation’ (Hall, 1992) told through the mediation of the London 2012 Opening Ceremony are interrogated. These are extremely ‘popular’—in Stuart Hall’s use of the word—and potent spaces for various invocations of (supra)national performance—what else might we expect from an Olympic spectacle (see e.g. Hogan, 2003; Tomlinson, 1996). Concretely grounded in material relations of the temporal juncture, these performative aspects of sporting spectacles often simplify, amplify, (de)politicalize, and (re)invent nation; acting as spaces for the assertion and affirmation of particular discursive constructions of nation that readily reflect and reproduce social hierarchies, are often highly gendered, and, offer particular constructions of *the* character, culture and the historical trajectory of people—constructions that by their very nature are acts of inclusion and exclusion (e.g. Hogan, 2003; Tzanelli, 2008). In this paper, the focus is on the London 2012 Olympic Games (hereafter London 2012); as a cultural form, *par excellence*, with respect to the delivery of a utopic multi-ethnic *national fantasy* (Berlant, 1991) that highlights central issues of being, belonging, privilege and hierarchy within a post-colonial heterophilic Britain (cf. Back, Sinha & Bryan, 2012; Skey, 2010).

‘Isles of Wonder’

Directed by film director Danny Boyle—most known for his adaptations of *Trainspotting* and *Slumdog Millionaire*—the London 2012 opening was designed to address “where were we [Britain], where have we come from, what is the heritage, the historical, what are we now and where are we going; and on that journey what are the values that we hold up as being valuable?” (Boyle, 2012). Initial reactions suggested that it was Britishness at its best: ‘Brilliant, breathtaking, brash and utterly bonkers’ (Rayner, 2012), a fusion of ‘left and right, old and new, rural and urban, imperial and metropolitan, and grotesque and beautiful’ (Mcdermott, 2012). It raised questions about ‘our’ place in the world, about ‘how we compare to other countries and the country we used to be, and with respect to what kind of nation are we anyway’ (Freedland, 2012), especially in a context in which the British national identities—and anxieties over her significance and place within a post-colonial global order—are historically fraught and uncertain (cf. Aughey 2010; Kumar 2010; Savage et. al., 2010). More specifically, the Isles of Wonder theme that ran through the Opening, drawn from the *Tempest*, poses significant questions about the noises on this Isle and what they say about Britain and Britishness: who speaks them, which noises are remembered and which are forgotten, who selects these noises, which are given weight, and which noises are silenced? Boyle’s ceremony is thus an important space for a powerful and spectacularised performance of a particular form of British national fantasy for global positioning and consumption, and raises important questions over the power to disseminate the past and the distortion, disappearance, or staging, of the ‘authentic’ in the name of *capital* (Chhabra et. al., 2003). In the balance of this article then, London 2012 is excavated as a powerful mnemonic that educates us in our present, and thus raise important questions over “the complex strategies of cultural identification, belonging and discursive address that function in the name of ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’ and make them immanent subjects and objects of a range of social and literary narratives” (Bhabba 1990: 292).

Somewhat in line with the pre-existing narrative of the Games that stretches back to the bid documentation, and which was centered on the global advantages of diversity, harmony and multiculturalism (see author c), Boyle’s emplotment was a “slightly critical” focus on “the best of

us [Britishness]”? (Boyle, interviewed on the BBC’s opening ceremony countdown programme, 27th July, 2012). Cognisant of an international audience, he continued, suggesting the performance had to be “truthful” and “represent us” while at the same time not “befuddling everybody abroad.” Emphasising the import of respecting the past while “pushing forward” with a performance about the “next generation”, Boyle suggested his re-imagining of Britishness was to be “inclusive” and “aware of our place in the world.” More specifically, in the Opening Ceremony media guide (LOCOG, 2012, p.11), Boyle highlighted the emphasis on the great revolutions in British society—the industrial revolution, the revolution of social attitudes, and the digital revolution—and the golden thread of purpose that runs the ceremony, “the idea of Jerusalem, of a better world that can be built through the prosperity of industry, through the caring nation that built the welfare state, through the joyous energy of popular culture, through the dream of universal communication.”ⁱⁱ

Boyle’s national mythologising raises important questions with respect to how original events and histories are “lifted out of their local historical contexts and reshaped to the relevancies established” (Smith 1999: 185). Indeed, the performance of the past in the present (Nora, 1989), offers a complex discursive construction of nation that builds upon common histories and memories—no matter how inclusionary, exclusionary or fabricated—which, through particular reconstructions of history, link the present to the past (Hall 1994 in De Cillia et al. 1999). As Healey (1997: 5) proposed, the acting out of the past is a space in which powerful groups can retell history in line with the present. Specifically, such discourses—told through powerful and popular sporting spectacle—act as a “very public educative arena in which ‘social memory is acted out, performed, or demonstrated; in between moments when we cease to live in time and space in order to reflect on, or be trained in, or entertained by something of our historicity, *our being-in-history*” (Healey, 1997. p.5, my emphasis). Further, following Hodgkin and Radstone (2003), these processes are not just pedagogic, they are political and ideological processes that involve us posing questions about the place of the past in the present, and, with regard to who is *entitled* to speak that past in the present?

Bucolic Britain: A Preferred Sense of Place

The prologue, which began an hour prior to the ceremony, depicted a bucolic Britain, a “tableau vivant of rural English life in the 18th century: a prelapsarian age of cows, goats, geese, sheep, a shire horse, a bank of wild flowers, a mill race, a Cotswold stone cottage with smoking chimneys, a wheatfield stippled with poppies, a wooden barn, a trio of maypoles, a kitchen garden, rustic games of cricket and football, a cluster of bee hives, picnics, a sturdy oak tree, [and] fluffy white clouds slowly circling the arena” (Williams, 2012). As a precursor to the ringing of the largest harmonically tuned bell in the world cast for the ceremony at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, an opening film played in the stadium (and was available to rights holders) that depicted the flow of the Thames river from its source in Kemble, Gloucestershire, through the Cotswold Hills and into London. The Britain of the *Wind in the Willows* and *Winnie the Pooh*—the countryside we all believe existed once (LOCOG, 2012)—was scored by choirs from the four corners of the British Isles: Londonderry Air came from Giants Causeway, Northern Ireland; Flower of Scotland from Edinburgh Castle, Bread of Heaven from Rhossili Beach, Wales; and Jerusalem was performed live in the Stadium. Embodying the “inventiveness and entrepreneurial spirit of Britain” (LOCOG, 2012, p.21) 50 Isambard Kingdom Brunels’, with the lead played by Kenneth Branagh, performed Caliban’s speech from the *Tempest*. Not surprisingly perhaps, given the excerpt revolved around the words “this isle is full of noises” which is delivered by Caliban (a primary antagonist in *The Tempest*) just before he tries to kill an imperial innovator who took away his island (Chen, 2012), bucolic Britain gave way to ‘Pandemonium as the turf was torn up and peasants turfed off their lands. As distinct then from the re-imagined tranquility of rural Britain (which forms a large component of Visit Britain’s tourist image and strategizing through London 2012), there was, as announced by BBC commentator Huw Edwards, a “brutal uprooting of rural Britain.”

Pandemonium—a term invented by Milton as the name for the capital city of Hell in *Paradise Lost*—saw the 50 Brunels’ oversee the dismantling of the meadows and fields that made way to “an array of vast chimneys emerging from the fertile earth, their infernal belching smoke replacing the homely cottage hearth and ushering in a world of steam engines and spinning jennys” (Williams, 2012). Representing the rapid industrialisation of Britain in the 19th Century,

and showcasing the nation as the birthplace of industry—“a simple national story, a reminder to the rest of the world [that she] covered itself in the soot of the industrial revolution before anyone else” (Mcdermott, 2012)—the scene points to the excitement, prosperity, ‘fear’ (Huw Edwards, BBC announcer) and disruption (disease, overcrowding in cities, child labour, and war) of the time (LOCOG, 2012). These ‘Dark satanic Mills’ as referenced in Milton’s Jerusalem performed earlier, forged the Olympic rings which were dramatically lifted—still smoldering—to the roof of the stadium, accompanied by Hazel Irvine (BBC commentator) announcing, perhaps with a subtle nod to Lash and Urry’s organized capitalism, ‘organised chaos.’ Then, in the midst of Pandemonium, a hush fell, and direction was averted to a poppy field (a reference to the poppy as a symbol of the fallen in John McRae’s In Flanders Fields [1915]) as an act of remembrance to the “dead of all wars, past and present” (LOCOG, 2012, p. 22). Finally, a parade of the British at “their most motley” (Williams, 2012)—including trade union marchers, immigrants of the Windrush generation, the Suffragettes, Pearly Kings and Queens, Chelsea pensioners and a squadron of Sgt. Peppers era Beatles and inflatable yellow submarines—was suggestive of the ability of working people “through trade unionism and protest to solve many of the problems” thrown up by Britain as the “workshop of the world” (LOCOG, 2012, p.22).

Following Ensink (1996 in Tileaga 2009), the reconstitution of an ‘authorised’ past is not part of an attempt to convey historical veracity; rather it is a process of the active contestation and negotiation of the past, a representative point of view acceptable to, and expressed in the name of, nation (see also Billig 1999): perhaps this is especially the case for televisual dissemination of the past given the medium does tend to lend itself to over-simplified narratives of the past (e.g. Bell & Gray, 2007) and even more so for a production of this scale, size and with such a diverse audience. The meanings assigned to past events—the processes of representing and engendering an (almost) ‘mythical’ version of historical national import (Tileaga 2009)—points us towards thinking about how heritage narratives can function internally as a locus of community affect and identity, and reproduce the concept of a spatially constructed, localized, mnemonic unity; a redefinition of place in the mind of external and internal consumers, a source of images and memories that symbolises *who belongs* in specific places (Graham, 2002; Zukin,

1995). While these representations are polysemic, and will be experienced, consumed, and indeed, performed, differently (Poria et. al., 2003), it is important to ask to *whose* past does *Green & Pleasant Land* and *Pandemonium* bear resemblance, whose *version* of the past was rolled out during the opening Ceremony and, by corollary, whose is silenced, marginalised, or destroyed, and how does the portrayal of this version of the past speak to our being in history, our sense of contemporary belonging?

The opening ceremony offered a ‘site of identification’ beyond our own autobiographies (especially with respect to the *Green and Pleasant Land* and *Pandemonium* segments) for the creative development and reconstruction of our present identities in relation to others (Keightley, 2011). *Green and Pleasant Land* and *Pandemonium* served an albeit arbitrary point of origin—what Bauman termed a *foci imaginarii* (Bauman 1991)—an important national myth that set the stage for the presentation of a *common* community, travelling through history together (Stephens 2007). The *Green and Pleasant Land* was a nation at ease with itself, an implicitly white, simple, stable, safe and purified eternal ‘England’ and in which ‘troubles’ brought about by industrialisation—gender relations in the form of the suffragettes, race relations addressed through incorporation of the Windrush descendants, working class uprising quelled through unionisation—were given a point of *closure*, presented as ‘historical artefact’ as opposed to ‘present reality’ (Kane, 2004). Offering a platform for making sense of contemporary Britishness—the performative segments to follow—*Green & Pleasant Land* and *Pandemonium* offered a simplified and selected narration of the British past, an “historical eschatology” (Bell, 2003, p.75) that elucidated its contemporary meaning through obliging the past to “conform to present configurations” (Hutton 1988: 311). In offering a ‘preferred’ sense of place (Grossberg 1996) through a carefully contoured remembering and forgetting, Boyle was able to simultaneously celebrate both Britain’s antiquity and its historical recency (Renan, 1939; Billig 1995) through these segments. At the same time as an end to division (gendered, classed, raced) the melancholic Poppy—the mortographic remembrance of the fallen—offered not just closure, but what Kane (2004) termed an ‘opening’ that compelled us to look forward to speculate through an economy of affect that illuminates a point where the aesthetic and political intersect.

Immediately following *Pandemonium*, and after a cursory—albeit parodic—nod to the Monarchy, *The Second to the right, and straight on till morning* (named after the location which Peter Pan gives to Neverland) segment set out to honour “two of Britain’s greatest achievements: its amazing body of children’s literature and its National Health Service (NHS)” (LOCOG, 2012, p. 26). Within a context of the selling of school playing fields, the marginalisation of physical activity and education in schools, the cutting of nursing staff, major cuts to disability allowanceⁱⁱⁱ, and the privatisation of the NHS (including children’s healthcare), and the desire for profit-making arms of the NHS to operate internationally, Boyle offered a thinly veiled critique of neoliberal British Conservatism. His neo-Blakeian social romanticism can be read as a vernacular response to, or a critique of, capitalist exploitation that was (uncomfortably) endorsed by the neo-liberal political elite (especially David Cameron).^{iv} Further, the emphasis on literary *fantasy* provided Boyle with an escape from Britain through parody and a means for negotiating changed conceptions of Britishness (Cecire, 2009; Savage et. al., 2010). Historical or future referents—such as the array of fantasy characters from childrens’ literature in the ceremony^v—acted as ‘literary myths’ (Aldridge, 1995 in Savage, 2010) that offered the means for viewers to negotiate with, and parody, the altered position of the UK in the broader European, post-imperial, global context (Savage et. al., 2010). Indeed, the array of abject characters were the antithesis of the idealised Anglicised history and landscape within children’s literature. Scholarly work on Harry Potter for example—represented through the darkness of Voldemort in *Pandemonium*—argues the texts are loaded with nationalistic symbols that “reaffirm the desirability of exclusive, traditional Britishness” (Cecire, 2009, p. 396), perpetuate a heteronormative heroism that ultimately squelches gender equality and sexual diversity in favour of the ideological status quo, re-centres whiteness and the perpetuation of extant hegemonic power blocs, and, suggests markers of difference that define both citizens and non-citizens with dangerous xenophobic connotations (cf. Cecire, 2009; Pugh & Wallace, 2006). Following Cecire (2009, p. 403), Boyle’s opening can be read as a fantasy predicated on an idealised Britain which offered reassuring assertions of tropes of the past that confirm and celebrate ‘native’ Britishness; the “natural” hierarchy of this phantasmagorical world was threatened, but undisturbed, by the demands of

cosmopolitan mores. Intruders/undesirables were identified, and neatly controlled, by 'normal' members of British society; an argument that can be extended once held together with the presentation of multi-ethnic Britain in Boyle's finale.

Frankie & June say ... Thanks Tim

With the *common* mooring of bucolic Britain established, class, race and gender relations presented as historical artefact, and with a thinly veiled critique of neoliberal political and economic rationalities, Boyle's offered a vision of the future/present: his "where *we* want to be." A scene which paid respect to the founder of the world wide web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the story was set in an "ordinary house – the kind in which most British people live" (LOCOG, 2012, p. 30) and depicted June (a teenage girl) getting ready to go out dancing. As June travels through London—and through a series of nightclubs that play music (images of which were depicted on an inflatable virtual version of the 'ordinary' house in the centre of the stadium) from the 1960s to the present—she glimpses a young man (Frankie) who passes on a different train. Utilising digital media (text messaging via mobile phones) and a social media invite back to the family house, the scene ends with a kiss between the two protagonists^{vi} and the full-size replica of the house revealing Tim Berners-Lee sitting at a desk tweeting "This is for everyone."^{vii}

Boyle's 'ordinary household' showcased a mixed-race family; further, the 1427 young volunteer dancers (especially the principals) were from a range of (undefined) racial and ethnic backgrounds^{viii}. Critical reaction from the 'left' heaped praise on "Boyle's impassioned poem of praise to the country he would most like to believe in. One that is tolerant, multicultural, fair and gay friendly and holds the principles of the welfare state stoutly at its heart" (Higgins, 2012). For others, such as Adrian Burley, a Conservative Party Member of Parliament, it was "leftie multicultural crap" (in Zirin, 2012). The Daily Mail unsurprisingly conflated the 'crisis of the NHS' with one of multiculturalism and immigration^{ix} (see Walker, 2012) and critiqued the segment for an inaccurate representation of 'England', for "almost, if not every, shot in the next sequence included an ethnic minority performer" and for the unlikelihood that the organizing

committee would be able to “find an educated white middle-aged mother and black father living together with a happy family in such a set-up.”

Boyle’s projection of London (as Britain) in ‘Frankie & June’ as a harmonious, diverse city, a middle-class metropolis and a plural space of opportunity devoid of antagonisms—a space of elective belonging—performs a terrifying and fetishistic politics (Davidson & Wyly, 2012; Whittaker, 2011). London is a city convulsed by massive welfare, housing benefit and legal aid cuts, spiraling unemployment and rising social insecurity (Graham, 2012) and is sustained by the exploitation of migrant bodies who nurture the creative class and the tourist image (Whittaker, 2011). Fully cognizant with immigration policy which is centered on a rhetoric of hospitality and tolerance (and one which welcomes some but expels others), this was a narcissistic imagining of Britishness as generous, tolerant and hospitable; “a utopian geography that is so powerful and all-encompassing that it ensures the very real processes of exploitation and social exclusion which sustain the vision remain out of sight” (Whittaker, 2011, p.126). Indeed, *Frankie & June* can be read as an enactment of what Fortier (2005) termed ‘pride politics’: a reactionary response to the critique (or attack) of nation, a (relative) loss of power and/or feelings of national vulnerability. Rather than a simplistic retraction to an essentialist core, these ‘pride politics’ assert a mythic, inclusive ‘multiculturalist nationalism’ and tolerance which necessitates ‘interpellating “others” to be seen to speak out as proud subjects of multicultural [British]’ (Fortier, 2005, p.562). The performance straddled the tensions between a shared (or imagined) sense or sentiment of bel(ong)ing together—a common language, cultural identity, ethnos—and the tensions, ambiguities and antagonisms of a multi-ethnic British society (e.g. Savage et. al., 2010; Yousuf, 2007).

These selective post-colonial imaginings—in stark contradistinction to the histories of the *Green & Pleasant Land* and *Pandemonium*, which were represented without struggle or contestation, or indeed, without reference to colonization or empire—take impetus from a coalition of interests: state-political, civic, sporting and corporate. In a context in which the constitution of self and other has been defined in relation to colonization and while certain racial categories are still discussed in terms of a ‘threat’ to the nation, this performance of ‘self’ is part

of a wider shift in the ways in which the categories of 'British' have been opened up (Skey, 2010). Based on a notion of 'integration', 'respect for British values and way of life' and the building of a single nation' (Shadow Home Secretary David Davis, 2005, in Yousuf, 2007), the re-imagined idea of Britishness posits 'shared values' as opposed to 'colour or unchangeable institutions' as defining a contemporary civic identity (Gordon Brown, 2005, in Yousuf, 2007). Following 7/7, this fostered a new emphasis on integrating minorities to British values, part of an *exceptional* need to restrict 'normal' democratic expressions of difference by assimilation to the required shared values (Kundnani, 2012). The representations of harmonious, youthful multiculturalism and the provision of 'ideal' multicultural subjects within this production performed this neo-ethnic version of national identity in which "“minority groups” were not only be let in, but redefined as integral to the nation” (Fortier, 2005, p.561). Represented as *legitimate* multicultural racialised subjects, they are given by Boyle—as auteur—an entitlement to belong to the national community and to speak in its name.

Frankie & June then is emblematic of the discourse of multiculturalism that has emerged in Britain over the last 10-15 years: no longer critiqued for destroying conservative ideas of English civility—or indeed a crisis of values of the British body politic—this civic multiculturalism (Modood, 2007) is marked by liberal themes such as secularism, individualism, gender equality, sexual freedom and freedom of expression (Kundnani, 2012). Perhaps better put, and in the case of *Frankie & June*, the body politic of civic multiculturalism is marked by *perceived* forms of secularism, individualism, gender equality, sexual freedom and freedom of expression. Minority groups—exemplified in this performance—were not only be 'let in', but redefined as integral to the nation; standing as exemplary (and free) embodiments of multicultural Britain. Critically however, their role—their everyday existence—is contingent on toeing the line(s) in several ways—corporate, nationalist, conservative, and gendered—as 'appropriate' national subjects: not least through being concretely grounded within a pre-told narrative (the *common* ground) of bucolic and Industrial Britain, the 'closure' of protest and *problems* bought about through cultural change, and the literal embodiment (through dance) and material manifestation of contemporary (post 1960s) British popular culture. Such attempts to create a

“culturally neutral British identity based on the idea of political citizenship assumes a *utopian abstraction of the nation*; in this imagined community of shared allegiance, ‘differences’ are transcended at the level of action” (Yousuf, 2007, p.363, my emphasis). Any racist reaction—as seen in various columns and public blogs—simply becomes reinterpreted as the majority’s *natural* reaction to a minority’s rejection of its national values (Kundnani, 2012).

The performance can be read through Giardina’s (2003) notion of ‘stylish hybridity’ (a development of bell hooks’ notion of stylish nihilism). That is, the performative representations of hyphenated persons and culture(s) occupying leading spaces in *Frankie & June* that purport to be positive and progressive artifacts subverting the status quo, are in fact iterations that *efface* the harsh realities witnessed in the everyday interactions of a diverse population. With Brown (2008, in Kundnani, 2012), such fantasies of national purity can literally *screen out* confrontation with structural inequalities (spatial concentration, social injustices such as disproportionate levels of unemployment, displacement health, poverty and drug abuse, feelings of disillusionment and resentment, ‘Islamophobia’, differential immigration statuses and the concomitant restrictions of rights, links between foreign and domestic policy, e.g. Modood, 2007; Pitcher, 2009; Rehman 2007; Stephens, 2007; Vertovec 2007), sources of greatest conflict (e.g. religious difference, accentuated connotations of difference through the body, such as heavily bearded young men or jilbab or niqab wearing women, e.g. Macdonald, 2011), and deny both the dependency of the privileged on that structure and of competing legitimating discourses. In this regard, the appeals to a foundational unity, the mobilisation of neo-ethnic subjectivities of nation, and the privileging of ‘*our*’ way of life, appear to offer little more than a ‘boutique multiculturalism’ (Fish 1997): a thin veneer obscuring a (social) structure, that essentializes and stereotypes difference and ignores the historically entrenched ‘race’-based inequalities responsible for (masked) social divisions (Troyna and Carrington 1990). This reproduction of co-opted citizens (Kundnani, 2012), which by its nature is predicated on the rejection of one’s extremist ideas, of swearing loyalty to a defined set of national values and mythologies, tests of values acquisition, erasure of one’s own experience and history in favour of the public celebration of national history, point to what McVeigh and Rolston term ‘rituals of humiliation’ (2009, p. 22) in the production of useful

minority bodies, subject and citizens in the performance of a post-colonial Britishness. With Kane (2004) then, one must question the forms of control present, or masked, in such performances, and the contradictions and inequalities that are softened and disguised; indeed, we must question how heritage—imbued with social relations—plays a functional role in social and structural inequalities, fails to move beyond the ephemeral and contingent, and masks long-term social and political continuities in the legitimation of extant power structures (Graham, 2002). In this neo-ethnic national performance that featured strong (neoliberal and gendered) multicultural (or) minority identities that complement a framework of vibrant, dynamic, national narratives, there thereby exist concerns over authorship, over the contingencies of inclusion, over how ‘difference’ is allowed, by whom, and in which ‘bounded’ ways?

Moreover, an “aesthetic of selective silence” (Kane, 2004, p.583) provided the platform to induce nostalgia and identification beyond our own selves while offering a powerful historical teleology. Multi-ethnic Britain was *given* no past: differential legitimating discourses, histories, belongings and identities were simply absent or silenced. The past—the commonalities—in which Boyle’s multi-ethnic present were concretely grounded were those of *Green & Pleasant Land* and *Pandemonium*: Anglicised, simple, stable, safe and pure. With no common history, no opportunity to travel through history together, the noises of the past were amplified in the present: plastic multi-ethnic performances in this Olympic post-museum represented acquiescence—commonality—with selected British histories, making it all the easier, with a subtle sight of hand, to reassert a utopic abstraction of nation and assimilation to core British values.

Directly following *Frankie & June* was a segment entitled *Abide with Me*, a short dramatisation of the “struggle between life and death” (LOCOG, 2012). Beautifully sung by Emeli Sande and choreographed and led by Akram Khan (born in London to Bangladeshi parents) the hymn was integrated into the ceremony given its “honest expression of the fear of approaching death [which] has made it popular with people of *all religions and none*” (LOCOG, 2012, my emphasis) and utilised powerful images of mortality (the setting sun, dust). Yet, despite the images on the memorial wall which accompanied the performance being relatives of opening

ceremony ticket holders (including Boyle) who had passed and were thus absent, it was widely misinterpreted (by the media and the public) as a homage to the victims of the London bombings of 7/7. Along with NBC (who controversially cut the segment from their broadcast), the BBC's Hazel Irvine similarly misinterpreted the performance as such: "The excitement of that moment in Singapore 7 years ago when London won the Games was tempered with great sorrow the very next day with events on the 7th July that year. Moving wall of memory remembering those who are no longer here to share in this wonderful event. This is a calming and reflective pause after the exuberance." Irvine was continuing the narrative set earlier in the BBC's Opening ceremony countdown show, in which Andrew Marr gave a potted history of London that focussed on the blitz and 7/7: conflating the reactions to both, he suggested these moments were, a la Gilroy (2004), models of commonality, of Britishness at its best, to which people should aspire: the dominant trope through which to understand contemporary national 'struggle'. Marr's presentation provided the narrative—at least for British viewers—for a wistful harking back to Second World War 'glories', a Manichean reassertion of *our* values and how *we* differ from others. It was a narrative in which questions of belonging morphed insidiously into questionings of loyalty, with its constructed dichotomy between commitment to undefined British values *or* Muslim values (Macdonald, 2011). These slippages, and indeed, the seemingly 'natural' response that this melancholic performance by Khan was somehow—by necessity—articulated with discourses of terror, threat and loyalty, speaks to a far wider demonization, and indeed homogenising, of British Muslims (see e.g. Gillespie, 2007; Kundnani, 2012; Macdonald, 2011; Meer and Modood 2009; Murthy, 2007; Skey, 2010). Thus, within a context of the Blitz narrative, of 7/7, and indeed of the agrarian and industrial economies, *Frankie & June* celebrated *our* apparent 'tolerance' and *our* apparently unproblematic diversity and inclusivity: an inclusivity contingent upon a conformity to an 'appropriate' and 'legitimate' British way of life.

In this sense, the cosmopolitanism of Boyle's British past/present did not mark a break from distinctly national cultures as much a complex reworking of them (Savage et. al., 2010). Inclusivity was controlled and there was little to question the reproduction of an established hierarchy of cultures that "consolidates hegemonic relations without challenging the hierarchy of

the majority and the minority” (Banjeree & Linstead, 2001, p. 704). Further, there was a general lack of specificity in both the historical positioning of those represented (Macdonald, 2011) and in the vagueness of the performative multi-ethnic corpus—they were, as Zirin (2012) suggested, ‘undefined black and brown bodies’. Crucially, unlike the majority, there was no narrative, no histories of settlement and intersection (save for the brief appearance of the Windrush, a past ‘problem’ given *closure*), no common journey or ‘foci imaginari’; while stylishly hybrid minority bodies took centre stage, as with other depictions of minorities, the focus was on an unquestioned belonging which neglected the communities from where they come from, geographically, socially and culturally, and enabled *visual icons of difference* to set the agenda (Macdonald, 2011). Drawing on Macdonald (2011), such a focus on an unquestioned be(long)ing provided acquiescence; this simultaneously denied a focus on where they come from and thus enables integration: minority pasts, especially religious pasts and presents—which were turned into an arena of potential threat—were simply silenced.

Coda

As a powerful, political, public and extremely popular pedagogic spectacle (Giroux, 2004), the London 2012 Opening Ceremony acts as a site par excellence for interrogation of how mediated sporting discourses, events, spectacles, (hi)stories and technologies of corporeal recollection and embodiment become ingrained with the discourses of nation, subjectivity, fear, regulation and consumption (Giroux, 2000; Giardina, 2005). Bound within a complex array of auteurs (Boyle, the IOC, the British government, the BBC, the host broadcaster, LOCOG) each with differing and often competing objectives (ranging from attracting tourists and investment, through to the promotion of ‘Britishness’ and the assertion of power on a world stage), the resultant text was a multi-layered, polysemic, and spectacular(ised) Olympic ceremony. The *Isles of Wonder* certainly offered a spectacular vision of a post-imperial, multicultural Britain under the aegis of global terror (both state/non-state) and neo-liberal globalisation; a literary and social narrative that both negotiated and tensely brushed against complex issues of be(long)ing, citizenship, othering, essentialist values, inclusion and identification with Britain and Britishness. The opening, emblematic of what Wait (2008) termed a ‘neoliberal politics of spectacle’, however

bears forth some uncomfortable truths: crucial questions about whose histories, whose representations and which peoples matter to, and for, such sporting spectacle—and thereby which are silenced, marginalised or essentialised—come to the fore when one ventures behind the seductive veil of such colossal scale national performativity. Boyle engineered a thinly veiled social romanticism^x that struck at the core of a neoliberal British conservatism, yet this sat alongside (albeit uncomfortably) and bolstered an extant cultural politics of race, gender and class that did little but consolidate hegemonic power relations.

Perhaps most tellingly, the *Isles of Wonder* provided insight into the hierarchies of belonging (Back, Sinha & Bryan, 2012; Macdonald, 2011) within this particular conjunctural moment in Britain. That is, and with Skey (2010), it is not so much the presence of the other (rather, emphasis is on the necessity of the other to the functioning of dominant forms of life) that creates tensions in Britishness, but how that ‘otherness’ is kept in place or controlled. Those who do not get to play a role in defining ‘our way of life’ and who are not deemed to be *properly British* (Stephens 2007) are thus perceived to be, and made to feel, more or less national than others given that they embody, or not, sanctified and valued social and physical cultural styles that constitute national capital (Hage, 1998 in Skey, 2010)^{xi}. Boyle’s production provided the very selective historical noises for which ‘we’ can ‘belong to’. This past—that which resembled the past of the majority—the everyday symbols, practices and spaces that underpin a sense of reality, the legitimate history of the majority, offer the anchor for relations between ‘them’ and ‘us’; concrete historically entrenched signifiers that define those rooted in Boyle’s British past as *unconditionally belonging* to, and the *rightful managers* of, nation (Skey, 2010, p, 728). Supported through the past in the present, revolution, the closure of uncertainties, and pride politics, it became clear who controlled the process of boundary maintenance, defined the conditions of belonging, and that which ethnic minorities are seen to ‘belong to’ (Skey, 2010).

Taken together—the conflation between multiculturalism and ‘our values’ or ‘our *ordinary* way of life’, the wistful nostalgia of the Blitz and the bucolic, and the marking of the minority body as threatening unless lingering questions of loyalty are negated—suggests that the Britain and Britishness portrayed through the *Isle of Wonder* served to maintain the privileged

political or symbolic positions by ethnicities that were dominant in the first place (Savage et. al., 2010). Boyle's Britain then, despite—if not because of—the stylish hybridity of *Frankie & June*, reasserted patterns of privilege: it was one in which “self, other and place continues to be understood and articulated in relation to a largely taken-for-granted national framework ... it is those who position themselves (and are recognised) as *belonging without question* that are provided with a more secure sense of identity” (Skey, 2010, p. 730). Thus, slightly reworking Back and colleagues (2012), the opening ceremony, as part of a larger narrative, positioned minority communities within new hierarchies of be(long)ing that replay aspects of colonial racism but in a particular spatialised form; a form suited to London's postcolonial situation: whiteness exists at the pinnacle with claims of automatic belonging “while black, Asian and Bengali presence is tolerated as long as it does not challenge the terms of the hierarchy itself” (p. 140).

As a window into the past/present then, the performance asserted an ethnic majority whose position remains ‘beyond question’ and whom recreate a ‘common sense’ view of the world as it is and should be; ‘others’ become marked against such a category (Skey, 2010). Evoking Gilroy (1992: 53), Britain was defined in the imagination as a “unified *cultural* community.” Yet importantly, it is a Britain in which there has been a reordering of the terms of inclusion: an assimilating, heterophilic Britishness accepts ‘multiple’ identities as long as they remain loyal to the nation (Back et. al., 2012). In the “recovery of national greatness *in the imagination*” (Gilroy, 1992, p. 53), racism (and for that matter, class antagonisms and gender politics) is rendered dead, yet the echoes of colonial racism are at play in the ‘limit points of multiculturalism’ that filters and orders immigration, identities and minorities in Britain (Back et. al., 2012). This paints an all too familiar, and highly troublesome, picture of post-Olympic Britishness that is all too suggestive of “neo-imperial hierarchies of belonging that corrode the quality of our social interactions and the possibility of humanity” (Back et. al., 2012, p. 151).

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Notes

ⁱ Methodologically, analysis of BBC television broadcasts and documents (including the official LOCOG media guides) were read utilizing Johnson et. als (2004) reading texts for dominance approach.

ⁱⁱ Reaction to the Opening Ceremony—gauged through analysis of international media response to the event—suggested a quintessentially British spectacular that may have baffled the rest of the world.

ⁱⁱⁱ This was powerfully protested during the Paralympic Opening ceremony, not least through the performance of Ian Drury’s ‘Spasticus Autisticus’ or the masking of controversial sponsor, ATOS, by the GB Team during their entrance into the stadium

^{iv} The choice of Tubular Bells as musical score for this segment appears as a subtle referent to the fragmentation of the NHS: it sold over 17m copies, was in the UK charts for 279 weeks, a major success for a then fledgling Virgin music brand. That Branson’s Virgin brand now includes in its stable private provider Virgin Care, was seemingly not lost on Boyle; he simultaneously silenced—through absence—Tony Blair, whose Labour government were responsible for winning the bid to host the Games, and who has interests (his wife and former healthcare advisor are central) in the private *Mee Healthcare* (with branches in supermarkets and in the Stratford Westfield that forms the gateway to the Olympic Park, areas which, according to the Mee homepage, offer ‘proven footfall’) and contributes to a fragmented health system in the UK (see also Chen, 2012).

^v Voldemort (Harry Potter), Cruella de Vil (101 Dalmations), Captain Hook (Peter Pan), the Childcatcher (Chitty Chitty Bang Bang), the Queen of Hearts (Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland) were all vanquished by a fleet of Mary Poppins.

^{vi} The scene was underscored by consumptive and heterosexty discourses in which the body becomes a site of both public and private investment and commoditised self-transformation. McRobbie & Garber, 1991 [1976]),

^{vii} Representing Bo, East London, Grime—invented in East London—artist Dizzie rascal performed ‘Bonkers’ during this segment. The lyrics speak more to the images of the 2011 summer riots in London than official Olympic destination positioning.

^{viii} Frankie was played by Henrique ‘Cel’ Costa, a mixed-race immigrant from Portugal and June by Jasmine Breinberg who is of mixed ethnic background from Deptford, South London.

^{ix} In an article titled “The NHS did not deserve to be so disgracefully glorified in this bonanza of left-wing propaganda”; following backlash, they subsequently heavily re-edited this article.

^x For sure, some of this was more overt, while other acts of transgression rather more subtle. Hey Jude, performed by Sir Paul McCartney as the finale to the opening ceremony was chosen given it was number 1 on the day in 1968 when Tommie Smith & John Carlos raised their fists in the infamous black glove salute highlighting the plight of African-Americans in the US at the Mexico Olympics. The single’s B-side was ‘Revolution’ (see Chen, 2012)

^{xi} With Savage (2010), there was a sheer invisibility of cultural referents in Boyle’s British imagination from vast areas of the world, specifically China and Asia in general, Africa and South America and Eastern Europe.