

Welcoming the World? Hospitality, Homonationalism, and the London 2012 Olympics

Phil Hubbard

*School of Social Policy, Sociology, and Social Research, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK;
p.hubbard@kent.ac.uk*

Eleanor Wilkinson

School of Geography, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

Abstract: In an era of intense “entrepreneurial” city marketing, overt attempts to court LGBT consumers and investors have been made not solely through the promotion of lesbian and gay arts festivals, pride celebrations and “specialised” cultural events, but also through “mainstream” mega-events. This paper explores this with reference to London’s 2012 Olympics, an event which welcomed LGBT spectators, volunteers and participants through a series of initiatives proclaiming the Games as distinctively “gay friendly”. Considering this in the light of queer critiques—particularly those concerning homonationalism—we argue that this marketing of London as sexually diverse relied on the effacement of certain sexual practices and spaces not easily accommodated within normative, Western models of sexual citizenship, tolerance and equality. In conclusion, it is argued that the Olympics represented a moment when particular ideas of sexual cosmopolitanism were deployed to regulate, order and normalise the variegated sexual landscapes of a world city.

Keywords: sexuality, sex work, world cities, tolerance, homonormativity

Introduction

The Summer Olympics is a spectacular celebration of sporting achievement and cosmopolitan globalism. However, it is also an increasingly commodified spectacle which has become the world’s greatest media and marketing event, with the International Olympic Committee acting as the hub through which a vast network of corporations capitalize upon the Olympics “brand” (Boykoff 2011; Guthman 2008). Geographers add a significant element to this now familiar leftist critique by suggesting that such mega-spectacles also instigate spatial displacements, removals and exclusions (Degan 2004; Kennelly and Watt 2011; Waitt 1999). Here, the development of Olympics stadia, and associated consumerist “playscapes” catering to tourists, athletes and journalists, is accused of setting in motion waves of corporate gentrification which ripple out from the epicentre of the Olympic city to take in adjacent neighbourhoods—ironically, often the neighbourhoods depicted as most benefitting from the hosting of the Olympics. A repeated outcome is the displacement of marginal groups from these newly remade spaces, with working class youth, ethnic minorities, and the homeless particularly vulnerable (Silvestre and de Oliveira, 2012; Tufts 2004).¹

Such critical geographic interpretations conceptualise the Olympics not as a sporting event per se, but a project of urban regeneration aiming to transform “problem places” and “unproductive” people into sites of active consumption and responsible citizenship (see Patton et al 2012:1470). Yet despite the existence of a substantial body of work on the class relations of such processes (Vanwynsberghe et al 2013), and some attention to questions of race and age (see Kennelly and Watt 2011; Rutheiser 2001; Watt 2013), the sexual landscapes associated with the Olympics and other sporting mega-events remain under-explored.² This is surprising given the attention devoted to gay tourism and the mobilities of the “global gay” (Binnie 2004), as well as emerging literatures on sexual commerce which hint at the importance of sexuality in the leisure and hospitality industries so integral to the Olympics (eg Collins 2012; Thurnell Read 2011). Hence, in this paper we argue that sexuality—so often marginalized in urban studies—is not just a side issue in the politics of urban development and spectacle, but is integral to the making of “safe spaces” for capital accumulation. In doing so ‘In doing so we seek to add to the emergent literature highlighting the significance of sexuality in processes of urban capital accumulation (e.g. Nast 2002; Hubbard 2004; Oswin 2007; Handhardt 2013), building on the insights offered by established studies of ‘gay gentrification’ (Knopp 1995; Doan and Higgins 2011; Schulman 2012).

In this paper we accordingly describe how specific ideas about the appropriate sexual identity (or identities) of the city were deployed in the neoliberal politics of speculation and boosterism that underpinned the London 2012 summer Olympics. Here, the Olympics is understood as a moment in which the future trajectory of the city was at stake, with both the physical remaking of the city, and its discursive framing, becoming integral to a civic project constructing a neoliberal urban future. We argue that sexuality was not incidental to this process given particular normative ideals of sexual behaviour were deployed to “shore up” this politically and economically conservative project. This involved more than a selective appropriation and promotion of particular sexual lifestyles, entailing an active disciplining of sexuality and space in an attempt to engineer specific urban outcomes. Sites of “perverse” or queer sexuality were repressed given these disturbed the “family-friendly” geographies of normativity (Wilkinson 2013) seen as most conducive to capital accumulation in the “creative age”.

Our analysis here pivots around the discourses of inclusion that were invoked by the London Olympic organisers, particularly with respect to sexual diversity. While this notion of welcome initially seemed unconditional, the impossibility of creating “unity in diversity” became evident as those positioned as intolerant of sexual diversity were condemned. Conversely, it became clear that some forms of sexual diversity were also considered intolerable. In this sense, the London 2012 provides the basis for a discussion of the way an urban mega-event can invoke and institutionalize particular ideas of what types of sexuality, and what types of sex, rightly belong in a world city.³ Noting that the organizers of the London Olympics actively promoted a particular vision of “sexual diversity”, we argue that the Olympics was important in consolidating London’s international reputation as “gay friendly” at the same time as it encouraged the marginalization of non-normative “queer”

sexualities. We accordingly conclude that specific gay identities and lifestyles were deployed in the marketing of the London Olympics only in so much that this created a sense of the city as safe for middle class forms of consumption, investment and business.

London: Unity in Diversity

Key to London's successful Olympic bid was the city's claim to possess "unity in diversity" and to "represent the world" (as claimed by London 2012 chairman, Lord Coe, when presenting its bid for the Games in 2005): London was apparently chosen over Paris, Moscow, Madrid and New York by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) precisely because its bid documents convinced voters that the city's diverse, multicultural and cosmopolitan character would ensure that people of diverse cultural, ethnic, religious and sexual backgrounds would be welcomed (Evans 2007). London was frequently described in bid documents as "one of the most multicultural cities in the world" (LOCOG 2008:7). Bulley and Lisle (2012:187) show this intertwining of diversity and hospitality was set out in the official bid document that was submitted by the local organizing committee (LOCOG) to the IOC in 2004 when it stated: "London has always been a place that welcomes people, ideas, information and goods from around the world. As a result London is notably diverse". Here, London was also presented as a microcosm of the UK, with a key discourse underpinning the successful 2012 Olympics bid being that "the UK is a creative, inclusive place to live".⁴

Critical geographical perspectives have shown that such boosterist narratives of inclusivity, diversity and unity mask both historical and present day injustices (see Kearns and Philo 1993). The triumphant place-branding of London as one of the world's most multicultural cities occludes histories of violent colonial rule: the reason why present-day London is so "diverse" is a story involving forcible displacements and dislocations. Add to this First World dominance, and the necessity of economic migration, and we might gain a different picture of one of the world's "most multicultural cities". Moreover, this narrative of diversity, inclusivity and unity sits at odds with some recent attempts taken by the UK state to project its borders overseas and to pre-empt, and prevent, specific forms of immigration and refugee migration (Vaughan-Williams 2010). Populist government rhetoric about the need to "crack down" on "illegal immigrants" highlights the clear limits to any portrayal of the UK as welcoming given the state is becoming increasingly inhospitable to many.⁵ Furthermore—as we describe below—these narratives of inclusivity sit in profound contradiction to what took place in order for the Olympics to occur: the displacement of certain "undesirable" groups from the city.

From the outset, the local Olympic committee nonetheless stressed that *all* communities would benefit from the event. A key component of the London Olympic bid was the creation of a sustainable legacy, with the bid envisioned "partly as an exercise in city marketing and partly as a longer-term statement of enduring principles" (Gold and Gold 2008:302). Evans (2007:299) notes London's bid document placed "greatest emphasis ... on the legacy and after-effects of the Olympic

leverage opportunity, rather than the event, its content and purpose". While notions of legacy are, as Patton et al (2012:1483) note, nebulous and opaque, foremost here was the idea that the Games would have a transformative effect on the East End of London, an area long characterized by an alterity "indicated by a long-standing association with the city's immigrant and working-class populations" (Kennelly and Watt 2011:767). Significantly, the London boroughs of Greenwich, Hackney, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest (where the main Olympic Park and athletes' village were located) have some of the most pronounced pockets of disadvantage in the UK, with each falling within the top third of the most deprived boroughs in London (MacRury and Poynter 2009; Raco and Tunney 2010). Thus one of the key London 2012 legacy promises was to "transform the heart of east London" (Department of Culture, Media, and Sport 2008).

This close association of the East End with the Olympics meant that this became a site where diverse populations came under scrutiny, imagined as both the prime beneficiaries of the Olympics, but also a problematic people existing on the margins of civilized society. The London Olympics was then inextricably linked to a wider project of neoliberalization concerned with creating a "more active consumer in a moral and economic sense" (Patton et al 2012:1471), and an extension of the longstanding government drive for "community cohesion" in this part of London (Newman 2007). Indeed an extensive and largely critical academic literature emerged following the award of the Olympics to London in July 2005, much of it providing a class-based critique of the potential impacts of the games on the local communities hosting it (MacRury and Poynter 2009). Discourses of displacement and gentrification were to the fore, contradicting the narrative told by the Olympic bid committee, which claimed that by "staging the Games in this part of the city, the most enduring legacy of the Olympics will be the regeneration of an entire community for the direct benefit of everyone who lives there".⁶ As such, the local Olympic organizing committee claimed the event would have an enduring beneficial impact for all, ignoring the detrimental impacts the Olympics might have for certain communities.

Taken together, this suggests a number of complex, and possibly contradictory, discourses underpinning the Olympic bid. First, the organizing committee made a claim to the "unity in diversity" characteristic of London. This was to suggest that London is globally leading, being more diverse, multicultural and welcoming than other world cities. Second, however, it was acknowledging a need to further foster this sense of inclusion and diversity by involving the varied communities of inner London in the hosting of the Olympics.⁷ Here, it is worth noting that the 2009 Strategic Regeneration Framework recognized the "embarrassing" levels of poverty evident in the East End of London, suggesting inequalities of this type were "holding back the whole of London and the national economy too" (see London Boroughs of Hackney, Greenwich, Newham, Tower Hamlets, and Waltham Forest 2009). A third, perhaps implicit, concern was that the Olympics would create unity within some of London's inner boroughs, areas described in the Framework document as "challenging" communities characterized by divergent life chances, "violent" and "gang crime", "multiple disadvantage" and "homelessness".

The London Olympics: Reinventing the (Sexual) City?

While questions of sexuality were understandably muted in initial bid documents, it was nevertheless always made clear that the LOCOG diversity strategy encapsulated sexual diversity. Indeed, the LOCOG Diversity and Inclusion Strategy (2008) identified sexual orientation (alongside ethnicity, disability, gender, faith and age) as one of the key dimensions of social diversity, considered fundamental to the creation of “cultures of respect” around the Games. Likewise, while the Strategic Regeneration Framework 2009 stated “there is very little evidence to show the impact of sexual orientation on life chances and experiences, and certainly nothing to note specific to the host boroughs”, sexual orientation was identified as an “equality characteristic” needing to be carefully monitored given evidence of “discrimination in education and at work, as well as an increase fear of (hate) crime” among LGBT populations. The appointment of Stephen Frost as Head of Diversity and Inclusion for the Games in 2007 was significant given his previous position as Head of Workforce Programmes at gay equality organization Stonewall. Visible inclusion in the opening and closing ceremonies, as well as in the accompanying cultural Olympiad, was hence promised to all “LGB stakeholders” involved in the organization of the games.

Another important aspect of producing inclusion at the London Olympics was the deployment of volunteers to welcome visitors, steward the games and oversee the transport of games competitors and visitors. These “front of house” volunteers (approximately 70,000 in number) were subject to intensive training and security clearance to ensure they managed visitors’ comportment in line with ideals of diversity and hospitality. Recognizing the importance of sexual diversity, LOCOG set a target of 7–10% volunteers from “LGB communities”, ultimately achieving just 5% recruitment. Other failures around sexual diversity were noted: for example, following the lead of Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics, a Pride House was proposed to act as an “LGBT hub” for the Olympics on Clapham Common, a move supported by a number of prominent “ambassadors”:

I’m very proud and pleased to be an ambassador for Pride House London. All eyes will be on London for the 2012 Games and Pride House is an idea that brings together so many of the elements that makes London one of the greatest cities in the world and a beacon of tolerance, diversity and pride. Pride House is a symbol of how London remains one of the most truly cosmopolitan and accepting cities in the world (Stephen Fry, cited in *Pink News*, 9 December 2011).⁸

The announcement of a programme of events to be held at Pride House over a 14-day period did, however, prompt some controversy, with the area’s longstanding reputation as an area of gay male cruising prompting the Friends of Clapham Common group to claim Pride House “is highly likely to become a magnet for undesirable elements of the gay community community”.⁹ John Amaechi, resident of Clapham and openly gay former basketball player, claimed that this objection was based on “archaic stereotypes and a complete misrepresentation of the facts”. He attempted to distance the gay community from “undesirable” acts such public cruising, by instead presenting a homonormative narrative of sameness:

Today's LGBT community and their straight friends are as much about family and children, book clubs and Bikram yoga and indeed a fanatical support for the greatest sporting spectacle in our lifetime, as any other part of the community (cited in *Pink News*, 1 February 2012).¹⁰

Here the “respectable gay” trumps the “dangerous queer” (Smith 1994), suggesting there were clear limits to who could be included in this new sexually diverse London. While the Friends of Clapham Common later apologized for their slight on the LGBT community, such publicity may have been a factor in the failure to attract sponsorship, which ultimately led to the abandonment of Pride House in April 2012.¹¹

Despite such setbacks, representing the Games as gay friendly was clearly important in the marketing of the London 2012, with the official organisers repeatedly emphasizing their commitment to sexual orientation diversity. For example, Paul Deighton, Chief Executive of LOCOG stated:

Our vision is as bold as it is simple—to use the power of the Games to inspire change. We want to reach out to all parts of the community and connect them with London 2012. We also want to leave a legacy of greater inclusion and understanding of diversity. Our diversity and inclusion pin badge range, starting with the LGBT pin badge, is one way of showing our support for a sporting environment built upon equality and inclusion.¹²

Tellingly, one question posed in the training questionnaire presented to Olympic volunteers asked them how they might deal with a spectator who is uncomfortable sitting near two men holding hands. Among multiple-choice answers are the options to “politely ask the couple to stop holding hands” or to tell the spectator to “stop being a homophobic idiot”. The preferred answer was to explain to them that “a huge diversity of people are at the London 2012 Games, which includes gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals and couples”.

All of this illustrates an awareness of, and sensitivity towards, questions of sexuality. In the following sections of this paper, we nevertheless explore some of shortcomings and limits to this promotion of sexual diversity. Specifically, we want to think about who was depicted as unwelcome, and those who were displaced in order for the Olympics to take place. We do so by focusing on two figures. The first is the “intolerant homophobe”, a figure failing to conform to LOCOG’s understanding of the “good” hospitable cosmopolitan subject by virtue of their inability or unwillingness to extend a welcome to lesbian and gay people. In considering this figure, we draw upon ongoing debates surrounding gay imperialism, homonationalism and Islamophobia, noting that gay rights have frequently been positioned as conflicting with the religious rights and values embraced by certain Muslims. Second, we turn to the figure of the sex worker in order to think about the sexual subjects who offered the “wrong” sort of welcome. Both examples allow us to explore the question of who was, and was not, welcome at London 2012.

(Neo)Imperialism: Britain’s Civilizing Mission for Global Gay Rights

While LOCOG and the London boroughs sought to use the games to create a particular sense of identity and belonging, the Olympics were inevitably caught up in

the agendas of other groups, both in the UK and beyond. While LOCOG wanted to market London as a world city of diversity and inclusivity, others used this narrative to encourage Britain to take an active role at the forefront of an imagined global gay rights movement. For example, the promotion of London as a lesbian and gay friendly world city by LOCOG often entwined with the arguments of those who wanted to use the Olympic movement as a way of promoting lesbian and gay rights worldwide. A prominent example here was human rights lawyer Mark Stephens, who gave a number of public lectures and media reports in 2012 arguing that the IOC ought to prevent any of the (then) 84 countries outlawing homosexuality from participating in the Olympics. Stephens claimed that competing nations should be made to comply with the non-discrimination clause in the Olympic Charter.¹³ He also urged athletes to “come out” in Britain and to seek asylum in the UK when they arrived for the Games. The UK was positioned as more advanced than nations that have laws prohibiting homosexuality,¹⁴ with Stephens arguing that the London Olympics presented “... a unique opportunity to put LGBT rights front and centre. London 2012 will be the world’s biggest sporting event, and the city has an opportunity to leave a lasting humanitarian legacy for LGBT” (Stephens 2012).¹⁵ In making his argument, Stephens drew obvious inspiration from those who have used past Olympics as a platform for civil rights and for gender equality. Indeed, Stephens argued it was now time for LGBT rights to take centre-stage, depicting past campaigns for civil rights as analogous with campaigns for lesbian and gay equality: “To distinguish between racial apartheid in South Africa ... and the criminalization of consensual sex between adults of the same gender is artificial” (Stephens 2012).

Yet it can be argued that there is an incredibly important distinction to be made between these two analogies. The condemnation of apartheid in South Africa is very different from positioning London as offering a universal model of lesbian and gay rights. By positioning these two examples as indistinguishable the complex and uneven geographies of colonization and power get papered over. Thus it is always crucial to take into consideration the varied complex power geometries at work in order to question who is condemning who, and who is mobilizing whom, in each of these campaigns. It is only once we have done so that we can understand the promotion of global gay rights to be a new form of British imperialism that a condemnation of apartheid or racial segregation never could be. As Ahmed notes:

Imperial narratives are those in which force is created as a gift, as if empire is what gives the other freedom, what brings the other modernity. The languages of freedom, equality, civility, diversity and light become associated with whiteness, as being what white subjects (queer or not queer) will give to others (Ahmed 2011:123).

While we would not deny that the Olympics is potentially a place to raise awareness around issues of lesbian and gay rights, the type of narrative surrounding campaigns for global gay rights can easily slip into a language of neo-imperialism, with Western nations depicted as leading the way. Indeed, a Eurocentric understanding of gay rights can also be seen in Stephens’ encouragement to lesbian and gay athletes to “come out” at the Olympics, and show the world that they are proud to be part of the global “LGB community”. In these narratives gay pride

is seen as inherently positive. It overlooks the political potential of those who cannot be proud, or do not want to be proud, and those whose pride might be mixed with shame. While Stephens recognized that not everyone could be “out and proud” his solution was to urge lesbian and gay athletes who do not feel safe “coming out” in their home countries to apply for asylum while in Britain. Yet, as Tucker (2009:15) notes, these ideals of universal sexual rights fail “to see the problems of very Western-centric legal rights—themselves located powerfully within ideas of Western sexual liberation tied to a ‘closet’ binary of openness/equality and secretiveness/inequality”. Those who remain closeted are positioned as oppressed or in denial (Hayes 2000). This presumed universal gay agenda of coming out and being proud, of embracing your “true” sexual identity, of seeing same-sex desire as an identity rather than a practice, overlooks the multitude of ways in which same-sex desire is experienced and understood (Epprecht 2004). It is, in short, a neo-imperial vision that normalizes a Western teleological notion of sexual rights and citizenship (Binnie 2004).

Despite the IOC not taking steps to prohibit countries who discriminate against lesbian and gay people from taking part, London 2012 was still depicted as having a central role in “civilizing” people from countries that discriminate against LGB people. For example, in one lecture Stephens urged students at universities housing athletes from nations that criminalize homosexuality “to educate them on where they have gone wrong”. The UK hence became depicted as responsible for the promotion of lesbian and gay rights on a global scale. The Olympics were seen as a way to speak out on global-gay rights issues, a means to teach less “developed” nations about the importance of lesbian and gay acceptance. Thus what is at work in these narratives is a notion of gay imperialism (Bracke 2012; Sabsay 2012).

Britain was positioned as an exemplar of lesbian and gay tolerance, educating and civilizing the “backwards” homophobic Other. These narratives can hence be understood as part of a broader notion of homonationalism (eg Davidson 2013; El-Tayeb 2012; Puar 2007), where lesbian and gay tolerance is seen as a source of national pride and positioned against other seemingly less-tolerant nations. Here we see a repetition of missionary colonial fantasy of “rescue”. The myth of British civility and inclusivity becomes the basis on which a neo-imperial vision of the promotion of global gay rights is built. Histories of imperialism are not just erased but also, in certain ways, repeated and (re)inscribed: Britain is both civilizer and saviour.

One of the key promises of the London 2012 bid—that of promoting cultural and sexual diversity—thus became a part of nationalist discourse, promoting the UK as a tolerant and accepting nation and distinguishing it from the other nation-states who fail to live up to this ideal. This narrative thus distances Britain, and by implication, the Olympics, from the “barbarism” of the state-sponsored homophobia found in certain parts of the world. Yet it does more than simply distance, as in many of these narratives Britain is clearly positioned as world-leading, implying that other countries are in need of British intervention to create more “modern” values of diversity of tolerance. This type of reading relies on an interpretation of athletes, visitors and (even) Londoners of African or Islamic Asian origin as “sexually oppressed [people] from less enlightened, pre-modern regimes” (Davidson 2013:17). Here, the

liberal Western gay nation is contrasted with the oppressed in a way that perpetuates established distinctions of sex, race, religion and gender, denying the possibility of what Douglas et al (2011) term a “genuinely queer anti-racist critique” that considers the inseparability of these identity categories.

Such observations on the “pitting of sexual diversity as a sign of modern civility against the ‘backwardness’ of certain forms of racialisation” (Douglas et al 2011: 111) are particularly revealing if we turn to consider the sexual landscapes of the East End boroughs where the Olympics unfolded. Here, in February 2011, stickers began to appear in some parts of Tower Hamlets proclaiming the area an “anti-gay zone” in the name of Allah.¹⁶ In response, a number of local people covered over the stickers and an East End Gay Pride march was hastily organized to challenge such homophobic discourse (Zanghellini 2012). However, when links between the organizers of the march and the political extremist group, the English Defence League, became apparent, this march was cancelled. Subsequent debate questioned whether a march, in any form, would merely represent an attempt to project homophobia onto the local Muslim community and promote Islamophobia on grounds of lesbian and gay tolerance. In one well publicized account, the homonational tendencies of any such action were presented as unequivocal, with the authors calling “on gay, queer and trans people with race and class privileges...to refuse our/their role in politically correcting racist agendas of policing and gentrification” (Haritaworn et al 2011:np). Such discourses highlight the, at times, uneasy relationship existing between different ethnicized, racialized and sexual groups in the East End, which clearly stood at odds with the tolerant and diverse reputation which was being endorsed by LOCOG. Moreover, such instances also highlight how a liberal notion of tolerance and diversity can be used to uphold exclusionary racist agendas.

This suggests clear limits to the LOCOG’s ideal of “unity in diversity”, with narratives of diversity appropriated to exclude those seen to be less inclusive. In this instance, intolerance towards lesbian and gay groups was used by some as a justification for Islamophobia (see Haritaworn et al 2012). This underlines that the ideals of sexual diversity promoted by the Olympics organizers inevitably, albeit inadvertently, positioned certain nations, and certain populations, as backwards or intolerant. This reminds us that any notion of “universal” welcome is fraught with contradiction. Hosting the Olympics necessitated extending a welcome to the world, yet, as Dikeç (2002:228) notes, hospitality is “not always liberating and emancipatory, but may conceal an oppressive aspect beneath its welcoming surface”. The welcoming diverse and tolerant image of the London Olympics failed to extend a welcome to those who do not uphold these same values, demanding an adoption of particular “civilized” norms. Yet there were other exclusions that need to be noted: as we will describe in the next section, some groups were not excluded because they were *intolerant* but because they were regarded as *intolerable*.

Queer Exclusions and Abject Presences

As we have outlined above, the marketing of the London Olympics as “gay friendly” was achieved through a variety of measures, including attempts to ensure

“front of house” hosts were offering the appropriate form of welcome (eg volunteers trained to be aware of sexual diversity). Yet beyond these groups were what Bulley and Lisle term the “behind the scenes” hosts whom:

allow London to “welcome the world” cheaply and efficiently. Without the laundry, waste management, cleaning, and food preparation, hosting the Olympic Games would not be possible. Yet despite their necessity, these figures are rarely mentioned in the Olympic bid. Some, such as taxi drivers, are treated as a willing population of workers ... while the majority of the hospitality industry in London—hotel managers, maids, chefs, souvenir sellers, and sex workers to name but a few—are absent from the bid document (Bulley and Lisle 2012:16).

The latter’s inclusion in this list is particularly telling. All of these figures might, as Bulley and Lisle note, be significant in offering forms of hospitality that ensure that visitors, delegates and competitors feel welcomed. But unlike the bars, cafes and clubs of Soho and Vauxhall which the *Visit Britain* websites draw attention to as the “twin hubs of LGBT life in London”,¹⁷ nothing is said of the spaces of informal sex work which are also found in these areas (and elsewhere in the capital). Perhaps this is not surprising given the *Visit Britain 2010–13 and 2012 Games Strategy* identified five key campaign “platforms”, namely “Classic Britain” (“castles, museums, gardens”), “Dynamic Britain” (arts and shopping), “Generation Y” (discerning young professionals born between 1978 and 1990) and “Luxury Britain” (high net worth individuals) alongside “Gay Britain”, the latter based on promotion of “gay friendly cities, pride events, food and drink, culture and sightseeing with a contemporary twist”—and not the consumption of sexual services.¹⁸ All this implies the targeting of what Duggan (2002:179) terms “a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” and an idealized “responsible” affluent white gay consumer. While the purchase of sexual services in some forms might be deemed compatible with this conservative norm (see Hubbard 2011 on integration of corporate lap dance in the formal night-time economy), the purchase of sex itself remains depicted as irresponsible and immoral, with both male and female prostitution in the UK tied to discourses of exploitation and abuse (Mai 2012). Nor do “public sex” and cruising feature in the official representation of London’s “gay culture”, both deemed dangerous and associated with a rebellious queer culture that has been sacrificed in the name of gay assimilation (Schulman 2012).

Related issues of gay marketing and hospitality have been explored in case studies of the differentiated welcome encountered by gay and queer-identified tourists in “gay villages”. These suggest that the welcome extended to LGBT groups often only encompasses affluent, white homonormative consumers: those typically imagined to be members of Richard Florida’s (2002) fabled “creative class”. Such villages have been described as exclusionary toward women (Doan and Higgins 2011), people of colour (Elder 2005), and working-class gays and lesbians (Lewis 2013). Elaborating, Binnie and Skeggs (2004) argue that the use of the white gay man to mark out cosmopolitanism has depended not only on them remaining in the position of the safe, usable Other, but also on a significant proportion of the remaining LGBT population being depicted as threatening or abject.¹⁹ As such, the promotion of white, gay, male consumer spaces occurs at the expense of spaces associated

with gay male cruising and “perverse” sex: the fact some individuals would want to move between, and experience, both spaces is not acknowledged.

Such observations resonate with Bell and Binnie’s (2004) argument that when cities incorporate their “gay village” into city marketing materials, this is a strategic move designed to show the city’s openness to difference rather than a genuine acceptance of queer identities. While they admit the notion of authenticity is problematic, they assert that “gay friendliness” has come to be used by cities as they jockey for position in the global urban hierarchy, and that this requires the marginalization of queer counter-publics. There are important parallels here with critiques of neoliberal gay and lesbian assimilation which suggest that gay villages are tools used by states to encourage “homonormative” lifestyles anchored in consumption rather than offering genuine liberation for LGBT populations (Lewis 2013). In this sense, while an Olympic city might wish to promote itself as a “sexy, funky and cool place in which to live, work, play and visit” (Tan 2003:420) through a promotion of sexual permissiveness, the implication is that there will be clear limits to this imposed by city-states that remain predominantly normative in their sexual morality and target markets. Sex work hence enjoys only a precarious existence within the marketing of the sexually diverse city: the tolerance Florida (2002) speaks of is rarely extended to encompass commercial sexual services because of the notions of risk, danger and exploitation that adhere to prostitution—an economic practice which is neither legalized nor formally incorporated into Britain’s economy.

The idea that the sex workers contribute little to the vitality and vibrancy of urban life appears widespread among urban boosters and governors (Hubbard 2004; Sasajimi 2012), despite some evidence that demand for sexual services increases during mega-events (Cunningham and Kendall 2011). In this sense, media stories about the possible “flood” of “trafficked” sex workers coming to London to profit from the Olympics immediately identified certain forms of sexuality as outwith the remit of hospitality:

Major sporting events always tend to precipitate a boom in the sex industry, with hundreds of thousands of visitors—including site workers, spectators and athletes—flooding an area. Sex trafficking almost doubled during the 2004 Athens Olympics, and there were reports of sex attacks in the athletes’ village at Sydney in 2000.²⁰

Eastern European migrants are swarming into London in “unprecedented” numbers, flooding the capital with beggars, pickpockets and prostitutes ahead of the Olympics, officials say.²¹

An “utterly unprecedented” number of eastern Europeans are being transported into the country with instructions to work a pre-allocated pitch. It is thought the largely Romanian groups are being lured to the capital by an organized crime ring on the “deluded belief” London can offer a better future. Some are understood to have arrived with Google printouts of Marble Arch. About 50 women were shipped into the Sussex Gardens area of west London last weekend, while high-class prostitutes are thought to be working outside the Cumberland Hotel.²²

This implies yet another racialized limit to the hospitality offered at the London Olympics whereby certain incomers from Eastern Europe were described as unwelcome, a sadly common trope observed in other studies where distinctions between “local” sex workers and exploited “foreign prostitutes” have been used to justify exclusionary actions (eg Kunkel 2012). As Mai (2012:120) argues, the anti-trafficking paradigm “engenders a hierarchical and essentialist dis-identification with migrant sex workers reproducing the West as equal, moral and safe”. Such discourses again position the UK as savior and sanctuary. The “problem” of sex work is depicted as primarily coming from Eastern Europe, with workers “flooding” in from “other” nation-states. This imperialist vision also strips agency from those who travel to the UK to work in the sex industry. Intervention was argued for to protect helpless trafficked victims, perpetuating similar neo-colonial imperialist discourses to the narratives at work in the promotion of global LGBT rights.

In the event, charities working with sex workers in the London boroughs closest to the Olympics Village reported little evidence of such influxes,²³ replicating trends noted in Vancouver’s 2010 Winter Olympics as well as South Africa’s World Cup 2010 (Bird and Donaldson 2009; Matheson and Finkel 2012). Irrespective, talk of trafficking provided an unanswerable case for clamping down on the city’s informal sex trade, placing specific spaces of all sex workers under considerable scrutiny. Efforts to remove street sex workers from the boroughs nearest to the Olympic park were pronounced (the number of arrests in the first six months of 2012 being double those for the entire 2011), with Diversion Schemes established in those areas where there were previously none, and threats of antisocial behaviour orders being served on those who refuse to participate.²⁴ Nor has off-street sex work been immune: 80 brothels were raided in Newham in 2011–2012 alone,²⁵ while Westminster City Council made repeated attempts in 2012–2013 to close flats used by female sex workers in Soho.²⁶ A critical report by London Assembly member Andrew Boff (2012:5) suggested that such raids had less than 1% success rate in identifying victims of trafficking, leading the author to argue that “police have been proactively raiding sex establishments without complaint nor significant intelligence that exploitation is taking place”. Georgina Perry, from the organisation “Open Doors”, which provides outreach to sex workers in the east end of London, argued that the “juggernaut” of publicity created a situation where “women who have been working off-street, safely, are now on the street selling sex in a much less safe environment” (cited in Boff 2012).²⁷ Such raids on brothels and arbitrary arrests hence created new fears and vulnerabilities amongst sex workers in East London, with this large-scale “clean-up effort” creating an inhospitable climate for sex workers, significantly compromising their safety (with workers less likely to report abuse, exploitation and other crimes). As the campaign group “Stop the Arrests” noted, “policing practices are putting sex workers in danger and undermining their rights”.²⁸

The quest for a hospitable, safe and sanitized space of Olympic welcome hence led to the creation of inhospitable spaces for those working within the sex industry in the east end of London. Hospitality and welcome were not extended to the figure of the (assumed female) sex worker. Instead sex work became (increasingly) depicted as an undesirable, abject, figure standing in the way of normative ideals of cosmopolitan hospitality and civilized sexual comportment and sexual inclusivity.

Therefore whilst idealized lesbian and gay consumers were welcomed in London, the “dangerous” queer other (in the form of the sex worker) was displaced.²⁹ This expulsion was deemed necessary to protect the image of London as a prosperous city where sexual exploitation is rare: by repressing informal sex work, an imperialist vision of prostitution as something that happens “over there” could be maintained. The norms of regulation used to promote the city as a cosmopolitan gay-friendly space, were, at the same time, covering up, and moving on, “undesirable” aspects of sex in the city.

As is often the case, sex workers were hence caught between the position of guests and hosts, being (g)host workers important in running London and the Olympics, yet subject to forms of governance demanding they remain invisible within the city marketing which offered a promise of an inclusive welcome to all. The “welcome” offered by the sex worker was not seen as part of an acceptable “cosmopolitan” encounter. Questions clearly circulate about the place of sexual commerce in the hosting of the Olympics, an event that has repeatedly attracted debates around trafficking, hospitality and abject sexualities in the city (Matheson and Finkel 2012). The vision of hospitality and diversity underpinning the London Olympics was clearly tied to consumption, but this welcome only extended to specific forms of consumption, with prostitution condemned—even though corporate hospitality in the form of adult entertainment and gentleman’s clubs prospered elsewhere in the neoliberal city (Hubbard 2011).

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that mega-events such as the Olympics require a careful governance of hospitality in which the economy is influenced via imaginations of desirable and undesirable categories of sexuality, as much as ones of ethnicity, class and gender. As we have shown, a key notion underpinning the marketing of the London Olympics was that LGBT groups would experience particular forms of welcome. But what were the limits to this welcome? And what sort of sexual normativities did this imagine? In this paper we have argued that the gay-friendly welcome adopted during London 2012 extended only so far as to encompass normative sexual identities and spaces. Indeed, while Gandy (2012) notes that the geography of sexual subcultures in London is highly variegated, including anonymous (gay) sex in public spaces and cruising grounds, these forms of sex stood at odds with the homonormative models embraced by the Olympic organizing committee, and were not accommodated within sexually normative, neoliberal notions of hospitality. Nor, we have suggested, was prostitution deemed to have a place within the Olympic city, with the idealization of the capital—and the nation—as civilized, tolerant and safe, requiring the elision of these “queer” and perverse forms of sex.

This paper has hence sought to challenge the celebratory marketing of London as a diverse and tolerant Olympic city by showing how this ideal of “unity in diversity” played out in practice, with competing strands of diversity coming into conflict. It has challenged the idea of “universal hospitality”, showing that liberal Western notions of sexual tolerance are always exclusionary. It was suggested that in the push to promote sexual diversity, intolerance was expressed towards those who did not

embrace this ideal, with the notion of sexual diversity itself only extending beyond the heterosexual familial norm to include homonormative gay and lesbian identities, and not rebellious, queer or perverse identities and practices. Furthermore, the paper has shown that notions of diversity can easily fall into a celebratory and solipsistic form of patriotism, with London and Britain being positioned as “world leading” in terms of lesbian and gay equality. This homonational trope presented Britain as a champion for worldwide lesbian and gay rights, with other nations depicted as backwards, in need of civilizing, or in need of rescue. This shows that the promotion of sexual diversity cannot simply be about the identification and tolerance of protected equality groups (eg lesbian and gay communities) but needs to consider the intersections between sexuality, class, religion and race to posit a more sensitive model of queer inclusion.

In drawing such conclusions, we suggest that a queer reading adds a significant dimension to class-dominated readings of the neoliberal politics of urban mega-events. While the alignment of middle class aesthetics, capital accumulation strategies and homonormativity has been noted previously (eg Bell and Binnie 2004; Duggan 2002), queer writing on homonationalism adds new perspectives on the ways that capital accumulation aligns with sexual, racial and class norms. Such notions give us purchase on questions of desire and corporeality that are sometimes lost in world city research (Hubbard 2011) as well as an appreciation that sexuality was not incidental to the neoliberal politics of hype and speculation that surrounded this global mega-event. As we have demonstrated, the promotion of a “consistent image of a safe, fun and sanitary city” (Kennelly and Watt 2011:768) involved the tolerance of sexual diversity—albeit a tolerance that encouraged forms of intolerance. Such conclusions underline what Handhardt (2013:178) refers to as a fundamental contradiction of contemporary urban politics in “which one can celebrate diversity and tolerance as a new investment strategy at the same time as one assails those very features” by naming specific groups as “liabilities”.

Endnotes

¹ Evidence from Atlanta 1996 (Rutheiser 1996), Sydney 2000 (Waite 1999), Athens 2004 (Beriatos and Gospodini 2004) and Beijing 2008 (Brownell 2012) repeatedly demonstrates such tendencies.

² It is important, however, to note the sizeable literature on how the Olympics presents ideals of the gendered and sexed body. See, for example, Otomo (2007) on the Tokyo Olympics of 1964, seen as a pivotal moment in transforming national bodily cultures.

³ Of course, there were a multitude of ways in which this homonormative marketing of London was resisted via various queer groups and protests: eg the Fattylympics took place near the Olympic park a few weeks prior to the start of the Games (see Cooper 2010).

⁴ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/our-promise-for-2012-how-the-uk-will-benefit-from-the-olympic-games-and-paralympic-games>

⁵ See <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/jul/29/go-home-campaign-illegal-immigrants>

⁶ See <http://www.london2012.com/documents/candidate-files/theme-1-olympic-games-concept-and-legacy.pdf>

⁷ For example, the five host boroughs signed a unique Multi Area Agreement underpinned by a £86 million investment programme designed to improve residents' lives. See <http://www.lgcplus.com/briefings/services/cultural-services/olympic-host-boroughs-sign-maa/5012725.article>

⁸ See <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2011/12/09/plans-for-london-2012-olympics-pride-house-london-to-be-unveiled-tonight/>

⁹ See <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2012/01/24/group-fears-undesirable-gays-at-olympics-event/> The Friends of Clapham Common group later issued a public apology when its comments were widely interpreted as homophobic; see <http://www.yourlocalguardian.co.uk/news/topstories/9503164>. Author_brands_Clapham_Common_group_bigoted_and_outdated/

¹⁰ See <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2012/02/01/john-amaechi-london-can-see-through-undesirable-gays-rhetoric/>

¹¹ A smaller scale Pride Tent was ultimately opened at Limehouse Basin on the Thames, between 3 and 7 August 2012, organized by Pride Sports UK with support from European Gay and Lesbian Sports Foundation.

¹² Cited in <http://www.london2012.com/media-centre/media-releases/2010/06/london-2012-celebrates-diversity-and-inclusion-with-new-.html>

¹³ The campaign to ban countries who prohibit homosexuality from competing in the Olympics intensified in the run-up to the Winter Olympics to be held in Sochi (Russia) 2014, with Russian legislation banning the public promotion of homosexuality also leading to calls to host the games elsewhere.

¹⁴ Reflecting on discourses that suggest that Britain sets the agenda for global gay pride, it is important to note instances of local gay shame within Britain, and particularly in London. We do not necessarily need to look “elsewhere” to discover shameful moments of homophobia: the depiction of Britain as a place of safety and sanctuary overlooks the homophobia (and transphobia) that is still widespread.

¹⁵ Cited in <http://www.theguardian.com/law/2012/may/21/london-olympics-gay-rights>

¹⁶ The source of these stickers remains unknown, with some claiming that they may have been put up by members of the English Defence League to stir up Islamophobia.

¹⁷ Soho, located at the heart of London’s West End, has long been recognized as London’s main “gay village”: its gradual gentrification and corporatization has had the impact of encouraging some gay-identified consumers to avoid this space in favor of the somewhat grittier and less commodified scenes associated with Vauxhall, located to the south of the river, as well as other less publicized “gay” districts in the East End.

¹⁸ Here it is worth noting that the “official” key target markets for Olympics tourism included Spain, Italy, France, Netherlands, Belgium, the US, Canada and Australia, with another 25 being deemed as of lesser, though still significant, importance (the majority in Latin America and the Far East). See http://www.visitbritain.org/Images/Project Update Nov2009__tcm139-181664.pdf

¹⁹ The link between homonormativity and cosmopolitan urbanism also positions the non-urban lesbian and gay subject as “other” (Brown 2012).

²⁰ Cited in <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2165027/London-set-flooded-prostitutes-2012-Olympics.html>

²¹ Data from unpublished representation made to All Party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution, Houses of Parliament, April 2013 by Georgina Perry, Open Doors charity.

²² Cited in <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/4276482/Immigrants-flood-capital-ahead-of-Olympics.html>

²³ Cited in <http://www.metro.co.uk/news/897160-prostitutes-and-beggars-flooding-london-ahead-of-2012-olympics>

²⁴ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-17588665> and <http://www.newham.gov.uk/Pages/News/ClampdownoncrimeandASBinStratford.aspx>

²⁵ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-17588665>

²⁶ For example, 200 police were deployed on 4 December 2013 to evict sex workers from 25 premises in Tisbury Court against which Closure Orders had been served. At subsequent hearings the English Collective of Prostitutes argued most of the flats were used by women working alone, and hence did not constitute brothels: irrespective, such closures are thought to be paving the way for the redevelopment of the area by Soho Estates (personal communication).

²⁷ Latterly Georgina Perry has gone on record to suggest that the relationship between sex work projects and sex workers has been “gravely damaged” by the Olympics, with outreach workers seen as “do-gooders or enforcers”; see <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/archives/29963>

²⁸ See <http://www.moratorium2012.org/press/press-release-wed-6-june/>

²⁹ Here we position all sex workers as “queer” regardless of their sexual orientation or the clientele they work for. Street prostitution remains incompatible with normative notions that sex should be both private and non-commercial, meaning our analysis is not just interested in “gay” sex work in the form of male “rent boys” or escorts. Indeed, distinguishing LGBT prostitution from heterosexual prostitution is, we would argue, increasingly dubious given the range of services most workers are prepared to offer. The media’s insistence on stereotyping prostitution as involving a young, female worker and older male client is thus a major impediment to understanding the diversity in this sector, as well as perpetuating particular myths which serve to render all sex work “perverse”.

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