



Restricting the Public in Public Space: The London 2012 Olympic Games, Hyper-Securitization and Marginalized Youth

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Abstract

In contrast to Olympic organizers' claims about the London 2012 Games as a celebration for all, we recount the experiences of low-income and marginally housed young people as experiencing exclusion from the benefits of the Games being held in their neighbourhood. Drawing on qualitative methods with young people living in the ethnically diverse and economically deprived Olympic host borough of Newham, we focus on public space and its limitations in the context of the 2012 Games. The article discusses the sense conveyed by young people of their neighbourhood being made beautiful for visitors, but of themselves being overly policed and subject to Olympic-related dispersal orders. We conclude by querying for whom is public space made available during the Olympic Games, suggesting that the benefactors are not economically marginalized young people living in the shadow of the Games.

Keywords: Public Space, Youth, Marginalization, Policing, Security, London Olympics

Introduction

1.1 What are the contours of public space when the Olympic Games come to town? Which 'public' does public space belong to? Whose interests are being considered when ordinances to 'protect' the public are enforced? These are the questions we are examining in this short 'rapid response' piece, through the experiences of low-income and marginally housed young people living in the host borough of Newham during the London 2012 Games. The accounts of marginalized youth can help to illuminate aspects of the London Games that are otherwise obscured by the concerted mass media focus on athletic prowess, national 'feel-good' sentiments and the International Olympic Committee's self-aggrandizing representations. Instead of a glamorous event that celebrates human achievement, low-income youths' experiences highlight the politics of urban spatial exclusion, played out along all too familiar class and racialized lines. Rather than benefitting from the 'trickle-down effect' that is promised for local residents when their city agrees to host an Olympic Games, the young people within our study recount their sense of displacement, of a city made beautiful for outsiders, while they themselves are policed into complying with the virtual performance of a global city that is welcoming and well-behaved. As opposed to feeling themselves and their interests to be protected by police and security, young people (particularly young Black men) describe their experiences of being targeted for unwelcome stop and search activities, and of being the subject of Olympic-specific dispersal orders.

1.2 The transformation of public space in the wake of an Olympic mega-event is a topic of increasing concern. Edited collections and journal articles documenting the issues pertaining to the Olympic Games in relation to public space, security and surveillance are proliferating (Bajc in press; Bennett & Haggerty 2011; Boyle & Haggerty 2009; Fussey et al. 2012; Graham 2012). There is also a wider literature on the erosion of public space for low income and racialized young people and communities in the UK and elsewhere (Brown 2013; Mitchell & Heynen 2009; Wacquant 2008). In this 'rapid response', we describe the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and white working-class and refugee/immigrant youth living in the deprived, ethnically diverse Olympic host borough of Newham in East London, a perspective that has not been prominent in either the official or academic 2012 Games' discourses (Hylton & Morpeth 2012). In what follows, we draw on interviews, focus groups, and 'walking tours' conducted during the period of the 2012 Games with 33 low-income and marginally housed young people, ages 16 to 24. All of

our participants live in a temporary housing block of flats, a last-stop housing solution intended to support them into employment and permanent accommodation. This was our third research visit to the same housing unit, having conducted previous research in 2010 and 2011 (see Kennelly & Watt 2011, 2012; and Watt 2013, for other research findings).

Beautification - 'there's flowers everywhere, everything looks pretty'

2.1 As athletes were completing their training and spectators were preparing to board flights to London, officials were putting the finishing touches on a range of initiatives designed to beautify the previously neglected public spaces of Stratford including streets, pavements and roads. Stratford is the main town centre in the borough of Newham, and is also where the site of the Olympic stadium is located and where many of the 2012 Olympic events occurred (connect to [hyperlink map here](#)). It was also the location of the block of flats in which the young people who participated in our study lived. From bouquets of flowers to removing gum from the pavement, participants in our research noted the improvements that had been made to Stratford's public spaces:

RES1:^[1] The only good thing is there's flowers everywhere, so everything looks pretty.

Multi: Yes.

RES1: And you don't trip no more when you're walking down the pavements 'cos they've made 'em all straight.

While appreciating the benefits of beautification efforts, participants were clear that such measures were taken not for the sake of local residents such as themselves, but to make a positive impression upon visitors coming for the sake of the Games:

RES8: The roads. They're so fresh. I didn't even notice that it was getting done until it was done.

RES9: They started taking old chewing gums off floors and stuff.

MOD1: So it's cleaner?

RES9: I saw it in the process, yeah, way cleaner.

RES3: Yeah, clean it up for loads of foreign visitors and that, yeah? But they don't do it for the actual residents.

2.3 Participants expressed skepticism and a sense of frustration about the use of public funds for such beautification efforts. They saw the energy and money being put into efforts to 'decorate' the city as another example of larger state neglect of their own straightened circumstances, and as part of an effort to deceive visitors into thinking their local neighbourhood more affluent and presentable than it actually was:

RES7: The lights on the trees.

RES5: And just all this decoration everywhere.

RES7: They're wasting a lot of money like that.

RES2: Because they're trying to make Newham look rich.

RES3: Which it's not.

RES2: Which it's not. There's still people out there struggling.

Their collective impression was that various public spaces, including parks and city streets, were being temporarily improved in an effort to disguise what participants described as years of neglect. Although enjoying the improvements that had been made to their immediate environment, participants held little hope that such conditions would remain in place once the Games were over. Overall, the main sentiment expressed is captured by the following comment:

RES6: [W]hy has it took for the Olympics to make this area look nice, right, d'ya know what I'm saying. This area used to be a shit hole, no one cared about Stratford. D'you know what I'm saying, now all of a sudden bang, they just make it all [nice].

Whose security? – 'I don't see the police down there for us'

3.1 Similar to the youths' views regarding the beautification efforts, they felt that the policing of Stratford was for the benefit of Olympic visitors, not for themselves. They saw the intensification of policing as linked to efforts to create an impression of a 'safe and secure' London, rather than responding to the actual longstanding issues of crime in the neighbourhood:

RES2: I noticed a change when the Olympics started, with the security and police and I just think why wasn't it like that [before]? Why was it that when the Olympics comes that everything has to be tight, everything has to be perfect sort of thing? [I]f they had this all the time then maybe there would have been less crimes and just less everything. I think just because they're trying to look good, trying to make London look good because people are coming and that, and I just think it's silly really. So after the Olympics all of this is going to go, there's not going to be much police around.

Several male youths expressed the belief that rather than being protected by the police, they were targeted as potential assailants who might endanger visiting tourists. This was particularly true for the young Black men in our study. As relayed by Todd, a tall Black youth in his early 20s who was stopped by the police shortly before the Olympics began:

Todd: [W]hen they [the police] stopped me and come up to me, I asked them, cos I was on

the phone, [I was] walking home and when they stopped me and I asked them like 'why did you stop me' and I said to them 'there's a lotta people round here, why did you stop me, why just me not others, but just me', and one of them was like 'cos of the way you are.' And I said 'what do you mean the way I am' and he was trying to grab my hand, I was like 'no you can't grab my hand like that, you've gotta explain yourself first,' cos they think they've got too much power and there were about four or five just grabbed me and put me on the floor, they was kicking me and one of them stepped here, stepped on my feet here, proper step on me like that.

Such accounts of police abuse of powers and the resulting resentment felt by young people resonate with existing research on 'stop and search' in relation to male BME youth traversing urban public space (Sharp & Atherton 2007) including in East London (Hallsworth & Ransom 2008). Indeed 'stop and search' data indicate that Black people are four times more likely to be stopped by police across London than White people under PACE Section 1, and 11 times more likely under Section 60 of the Criminal Justice & Public Order Act (Stopwatch 2012).

3.2 There was a marked gender difference in responses to the question of 'safety' in relation to police. The young women in our study ranged from indifferent to relieved to see more police on the streets as the Olympics approached, due largely to their impression that Stratford had become a terrorist target. The young men in our study, by contrast, saw the increased police presence as being unhelpful at best to endangering them at worst. A recent highly publicized fatal stabbing of a young Black man in the Westfield Stratford City shopping mega-mall (The Guardian 2012), which was the *de facto* main gateway to the London 2012 Games, had led many of the youth to conclude that the police were not interested in protecting them or their local peers.

RES8: This Olympics thing, they're going on about how they've got snipers on the roof, yeah, long before the Olympics starts. Yeah? And that. To protect their foreign guests and stuff. But then [the young man who was killed] lives in Stratford, you know? He goes to Westfield which is, what, ten minutes [from here]. There's no protection for the people who live in London until after something bad happens.^[2]

Attending public Olympic events – 'they could blatantly see that I was just having a dance'

4.1 The young people's impression of an Olympic Games that was not for their benefit, and of public space that was being beautified and protected for foreign visitors, was only exacerbated once the Games began. Widely advertised free public screenings of Olympic events in parks around London were accompanied by notices posted throughout Stratford announcing a 'dispersal order' for the Stratford area by the London Metropolitan Police (Figure 1). Such dispersal powers were introduced under Part 4 of the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003, and have been considered part of the legislative armoury responsible for criminalizing youthful sociability in urban public spaces (Crawford 2009). On the first night of the Olympic Games, during a free screening of the Opening Ceremonies at nearby Stratford Park, three of our participants were 'dispersed' along the terms of this order.

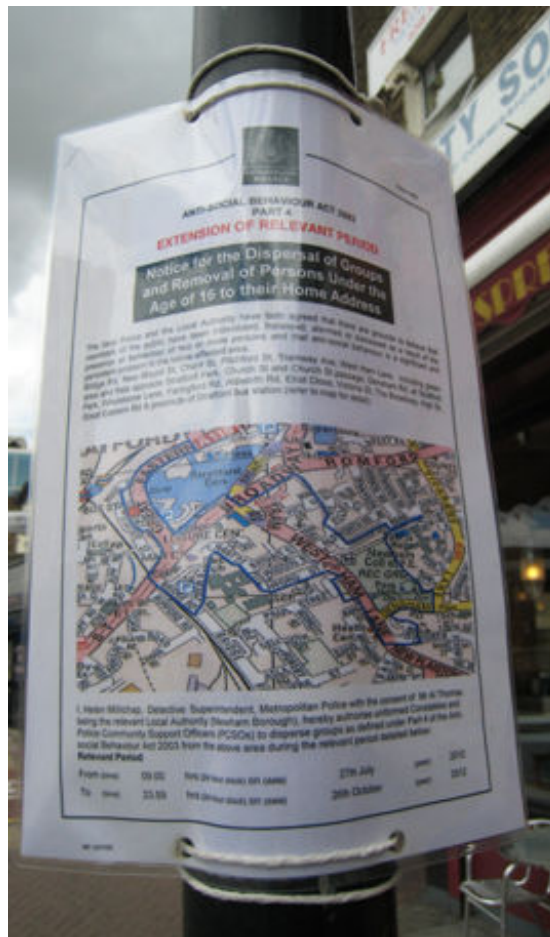


Figure 1. Dispersal Order in Stratford, July 2012. Source: Paul Watt, 2012.

The widely distributed sign in Stratford was titled 'Notice for the Dispersal of Groups and Removal of Persons Under the Age of 16 to Their Home Address' (Figure 1). The notice authorized the police to 'disperse' groups of two or more, due to the belief that 'members of the public have been intimidated, harassed, alarmed, or distressed' by the behaviour of such groups. Its period of implementation coincided with the Olympic and Paralympic games, starting on 27 July 2012 and running to 26 October 2012. This dispersal order clearly targeted young people with its explicit reference to under-16s, and although our participants were not within this age range, they understood the dispersal order as also being aimed at themselves, i.e. those in their early twenties.

Isaac: [The police officer] said to me 'you can't be in a group there is a dispersal order.'

Scott: [For] two people or more.

Isaac: So basically you have to be by yourself.

Chibali: And who is going to do that if you are a young person? When a police officer asks you.

Isaac: They're forty-four years old and [there's] a family and that, [the police] don't make them disperse, no, no. I say 'what, [we have to disperse] because we have got tracks [sweatpants] and trainers [running shoes] on?'

This conversation took place five days after the Opening Ceremonies, while Isaac (age 24, Black), Scott (age 23, White), and Chibali (age 20, Black) led the two co-authors around Stratford as part of a walking tour of the local neighbourhood, a tour based upon the 'go-along' method, particularly suitable for understanding the 'meanings of place in everyday experience and practices' (Kusenbach 2003: 455). As we were each patted down and had our bags examined en route into Stratford Park, Isaac pointed out where the altercation had happened in the park. In an earlier interview, he had described it as follows:

Isaac: So yeah, I watched it [the Opening Ceremonies] at the park, yeah it was nice, it was nice, I had a bit of hassle from the fuzz but yeah it was nice, apart from that, it was great.

Jackie: So what did the police do?

Isaac: I don't know if it's recognition or what, they're looking for some badge or whatever it is cos they could blatantly see that I was just having a dance, I'm with the music, I was entertaining, I'm there with a young lady and he [the police officer] kinda, he kinda flopped me anyway as well cos the young lady walked off and he kinda embarrassed me in front of a crowd, you know, you can see me I'm dancing, even the sergeant said it, the sergeant said 'yeah I just saw him dancing', dah, dah, dah, dah. But it was the way he approached me and [said] 'come over here mate, come to the side' like, so I'm saying to [him] 'I ain't done nothing, if I have to come to you it makes me look like I've done something'.

In Isaac's account, what he understood as his own innocent behaviour ['I was just having a dance'] was interpreted as threatening or even potentially criminal by the police officer in question. By asking him to

approach the officer instead of the other way around, Isaac felt that he was being implicated in criminal activity ['It makes me look like I've done something']. Isaac felt himself to have been merely enjoying the spectacle of the Opening Ceremonies in the only public space to which he had free access to watch the Games.

4.2 Isaac's friend Chibali, part of the group of three who were 'dispersed', noted that it was the Olympics' presence in London that had justified the implementation of this particular law:

Chibali: Do you know what, there was no such thing as a dispersal order until the Olympics. How the hell did the government make up the laws like this? I don't understand. There should be some law against how you can just make up a law, do you get what I am trying to say? You can't just chuck a law out there like that and say dispersal order - what is dispersal order? I never heard this in my life. When my man [the police officer] was telling me about the dispersal order he is telling me basically you two can't be walking together. I am sorry but to me I disagree with that. I am a British Citizen as far as I am concerned if I want to walk with my friend through a public park, yes at that. Basically before this was held I could walk through this park without a dispersal order so what is the issue now then basically? Because I can see families walking together and there is not a dispersal order for them though. I mean if I was disrupting something I can understand there being a dispersal order for someone that is disruptive but if you are not actually participating in anything at all what so ever, how can you get a dispersal order, do you know what I am trying to say?

Conclusion

5.1 The transformation of public space during an Olympic Games is an issue of pressing concern. Numerous scholars have noted the manner in which the Olympics have increasingly become a lever to accelerate processes of neoliberal urbanization that lead to the sanitization and de facto privatization of formerly public spaces, including through policing and security practices (Short 2008; Horne & Whannel 2011), while the negative effects on marginalized and impoverished populations within host cities are heightened (COHRE 2007; Porter et al. 2009; Watt 2013). The urban spatial restructuring that has occurred as a direct or indirect result of the 2012 Olympics has meant that East London is experiencing what Fussey et al. (2012: 278) describe as 'an intensive process of securitization'. In this 'rapid response', we have provided qualitative accounts of how public space and associated securitization processes are experienced by marginalized young people living in the shadow of the London 2012 Olympics mega-event.

5.2 Our findings support wider research that suggests that, in the context of the Olympics, the contours of public space change. Colliding with the security demands that are increasingly associated with such mega-events (Giulianotti & Klauser 2010), as well as the entrenched economic and racial inequality that already shapes both police presence in certain communities and police targeting of specific populations (Sharp & Atherton 2007), the notion of 'public' is narrowed to a specific subset of the citizenry alongside tourist guests. Ironically, this subset may not include disadvantaged young East Londoners, and especially BME youth who so symbolized the nation's Olympics hopes (Hylton & Morpeth 2012). Despite beautification efforts that can be enjoyed by all residents, the increased policing, combined with the implementation of the 'dispersal order', effectively curtailed the presence of local working class and BME young people in Olympic public space.

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Notes

¹In the context of focus groups, respondents are identified as RES1, RES2 (Respondent 1, Respondent 2, etc). The researcher is identified as MOD (or Moderator). This is due to the difficulty of attributing specific identities to the recorded voices in the focus groups. Transcripts from single respondent interviews are identified with a pseudonym; each participant who did an interview was asked if they would like to choose a pseudonym, but the majority declined. The lead author subsequently chose the pseudonyms for each respondent.

²Part of the £1.45 bn. cost of the Westfield Stratford City mega-mall 'is owed to its comprehensive security features, considered to be the most advanced in Europe' (Fussey et al. 2012: 273).

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