

## **One guy named Mo: race, nation and the London 2012 Olympic Games**

Original article submission date: 23 January 2015

Revised article submission date: 28 April 2015

## **Abstract**

The triumphal track and field performances of British distance runner, Mo Farah, at the London 2012 Olympic Games were lauded both for their athletic endeavour and for their perceived validation of the rhetoric of ethnic and cultural diversity and inclusion in which the Games were ensconced. By analysing coverage of the athlete's achievements in mainstream British newspapers, this article presents a more complicated and critical reading of the relationship between Britishness, multiculturalism, the politics of inclusion and the London Games. Employing a Critical Discourse Approach, the article shows that Farah was constructed and represented by the media using narratives that are familiar, palatable and reassuring to the public; and that sustain hegemonic models of racialised nationhood and dominant ideologies around sport.

## Introduction

The triumphal track and field performances of British distance runner, Mohammed ‘Mo’ Farah, at the London 2012 Olympic Games – gold medallist in the men’s 5000m and 10000m events – were lauded rightly for their extraordinary athletic endeavour. Only six men before him had achieved this Olympic “distance double”. As a Somali-born, black, British Muslim athlete, his accomplishments were also celebrated for their perceived validation of the rhetoric of ethnic and cultural diversity in which these Games were ensconced. Immediately after crossing the finish line for his first victory, the jubilant Farah wrapped himself in the flag of the United Kingdom (UK). He was joined on the running track by his (heavily pregnant) Yemeni-Palestinian wife, Tania, and their daughter, Rhianna, forming one of the most iconic images of these Olympics for British sports fans. Within moments, Farah’s personal achievement had become a matter of national significance. Politicians, media commentators, fellow sport stars and the general public inferred the victory’s confirmation of the inclusive and tolerant nature of Britain and its populace, and stressed accordingly British sport’s putative arrival at the realm of post-racialism (Burdsey, 2014).

The synergy between Mo Farah, multiculturalism and the London Games **demonstrates how resonant sporting celebrities and mega events are intertwined strategically with state ideologies and the cultural politics of race, religion and gender to forge particular tropes of national representation.**

This article presents the larger political context of mass spectacles like the Olympics in order to interrogate critically the biopolitical relationship between race, bodies and belonging in a neoliberal epoch (Davison & Shire, 2015). This is undertaken through an analysis of the ways that Farah’s national, ethnic and religious identities were constructed and represented in British

mainstream newspapers at the time of his athletic successes. Specifically, the discussion demonstrates that dominant discourses reflected exclusionary, and at times contradictory, attitudes around Britishness, Islam, migration, multiculturalism and citizenship. They reinforced current governmental agendas and popular viewpoints on immigration policy, and the neoliberal promotion and management of diversity. In doing so they ended up endorsing ideas of a “crisis” of multiculturalism (Lentin & Titley, 2011), promoting instead a model of conservative, post-racial assimilationism.

This article begins by exploring how the cultural politics of race surrounded the London 2012 Olympics. It highlights the fluctuating role of British state multiculturalism in the city winning and hosting the Games; and it challenges common assumptions about the inclusion of minority ethnic communities in its organisation, participation and consumption. Next, the article examines Farah’s emergence as a multicultural icon in the context of previous British minority ethnic sport stars, and discusses the significance of his intersectional identities located within a larger global, neoliberal marketplace. Third, the article provides an empirical analysis of the various ways in which Farah’s athletic successes and subjectivities were constructed and represented in British mainstream newspapers, in a way that made them legible and palatable to the national polity. Lastly, the article contests the assumed role of sport and sporting celebrities in facilitating an enduring progressive politics of nationhood, at a time when the dynamics of race and multiculturalism in much of the United Kingdom are still characterised by division, exclusion and prejudice. **While focusing on a specific individual and national context, the article speaks to broader issues related to the inclusion and representation of South Asian and/or Muslim athletes**

in the Global North in the fifteen years succeeding the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (Burdsey, 2007; Falcous & Silk, 2006; Thangaraj, 2015).

### **London 2012, Olympic diversity and the “Plastic Brits”**

Much has been made of the significance of the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG)’s strategic decision to centralise the city’s – and, by implication, Britain’s – ethnic and cultural diversity in their bid to win the 2012 Games (Burdsey, 2012; Falcous & Silk, 2010; Hylton & Morpeth, 2009, 2012; MacRury & Poynter, 2010; Newman, 2007; Pope, 2014; Silk, 2011). This emphasis remained foremost in the promotional rhetoric from local and national government, sporting performers and agencies, and the mass media, in the lead-up to the mega event. The prominence attached to generic notions of multiculturalism was ironic, and at times contradictory, given that *multiculturalism* was denounced and dismantled as a state ideology and practice almost immediately after the host venue decision was announced in July 2005. **Having been a fundamental principle of the British political Left for many decades, it was now perceived – across the political spectrum – to have facilitated the creation of segregated communities and the emergence of domestic Islamic extremism (Lentin & Titley, 2011), especially the terrorist attacks on the London transport network the morning after the city had won the Games.** This demonstrates the role of the London Games in promoting a specific ‘narrative of nation’ (Hall, 1992) – a hegemonic conceptualisation of modern Britishness (MacRury & Poynter, 2010; Winter, 2013), entailing an image of Britain as an *already* harmonious and integrated society, and a welcoming and tolerant state (Falcous & Silk, 2010; Katwala, Ballinger & Rhodes, 2014).

Especially notable was the frequent substitution of the term “multiculturalism” with that of “diversity” in official London 2012 documentation (Burdsey, 2012). This nomenclatural side-step enabled issues around ethnicity and culture to be celebrated in a comforting, non-confrontational and nebulous manner (Ahmed, 2012), but at the same time distanced the Games both from a Left-leaning political ideology and the pejorative connotations outlined above. **Such moves away from the doctrine of multiculturalism go hand-in-glove with discourses of ‘post-racialism’.** As Lentin (2012, 1270-71) argues, ‘those who oppose multiculturalism see it as having been imposed by racial and ethnic minorities whose demands for recognition were prioritized over all other concerns’. Accordingly, the post-racial position facilitates and justifies a shift away from recognition of the different identities and needs of respective **minority ethnic groups.** By erasing power and politics from the mix, it ignores and obscures the racialized social relations between different groups and their diverse structural experiences, conflating material inequalities with ethnic difference rather than discrimination.

London’s diverse and sizeable minority ethnic populations were near absent at elite levels of the sporting governance boards, and bureaucratic committees and agencies, organising the London Olympics.<sup>1</sup> They were much more likely to be employed at lower levels, through intermediary personnel bureaus and in temporary positions (Burdsey, 2012). Stephen Frost, LOCOG’s Head of Diversity and Inclusion, maintains that employment figures for the Games were largely representative of the city’s multicultural demographics (Frost, 2014). However, personal (and, admittedly, non-systematic) observations from attending a number of events at the Games suggest that minority ethnic staff tended to be working in poorly paid and short-term contract security, hospitality and service sector positions. The official *Games Maker* volunteers likewise

appeared unrepresentative of the ethnic diversity of the six host London boroughs. Evidence also points to the negligible number of minority ethnic organisations in east London that held contracts to deliver aspects of the Games, with certain barriers restricting their capacity to win tenders (Calvo, 2014). Moreover, critical commentators have highlighted the limited and tokenistic references to British multiculturalism in the opening and closing ceremonies (Silk, 2015; Winter, 2013), with minority ethnic communities' contributions confined to narrow, predictable themes of empire, immigration and popular music. The assorted biographies of the participating British athletes (Ford, Jolley, Katwala & Mehta, 2012) were utilised to reject claims of racial inequality in elite sport, yet when one accounts for their ethnic, class and educational backgrounds, the team was still largely unrepresentative of multicultural Britain. These trends and demographics, along with those of the spectators – especially the widespread absence of east London's sizeable British Asian communities (Mitra, 2014) – indicate what Perryman (2013, p.24) calls 'the Home Counties Games, not London's, white flight in reverse'.<sup>2</sup>

Arguably the most significant contextual issue for an analysis of Mo Farah (and contemporaneous British minority ethnic Olympians) is the opposition by a group of columnists from the right-of-centre *Daily Mail* newspaper to the so-called "Plastic Brits" (Poulton & Maguire, 2012). In 2011, reflecting the prejudiced ethos found habitually on the front pages of his publication,<sup>3</sup> sportswriter Martin Samuel spoke out against Team GB's plans to employ the broad citizenship criteria available to National Olympic Committees in selecting their teams.<sup>4</sup> The "crime" of these athletes, according to the newspaper, was to have changed their sporting participatory allegiance to the UK. Most of them had British passports, residency rights and/or British parents; yet the fact that they had been born and/or lived overseas and, equally

importantly, competed previously for other nations was regarded as problematic. **Although the newspaper claimed that this mobility contravened sporting fairness and the rules of competition, a closer, more critical reading uncovers a discourse about Britishness itself.** As Poulton and Maguire (2012, p.11) argue, ‘the “plastic Brit” narrative can thus be read as an insight into right-wing perceptions about Britain and “Britishness” and underscored by an anti-multiculturalism that struggles to celebrate dual-nationals as truly one of us’. Although some white athletes were included in the original “Plastic Brits” narrative, the predominance of black athletes in accompanying images shows that the newspaper’s stance was also about an imagined Britain that is racialized as white. Furthermore, the focus on the likes of Yamile Aldama, Shana Cox, Tiffany Porter and Shara Proctor illuminate how female bodies often take on symbolic roles in constructing the identity of ethno-national collectivities (Yuval-Davis, 1997). This discourse reaffirmed contemporary hierarchies of belonging (Back & Sinha with Bryan, 2012), and racialized and gendered notions of citizenship, both biological and cultural. It demonstrated how certain populations are made into ‘impossible subjects’ (Ngai, 2004), with corporeal and cultural differences deemed out-of-sync and irreconcilable with this particular dominant interpretation of (sporting) Britishness.

Before the Games, the *Daily Mail* seemed unsure how Mo Farah should fit into the discourse. Some of the newspaper’s columnists pointed to his Somali birthplace and migration history, plus his current residence in Portland, Oregon as denoting an outsider status. By the time of his success, the paper was purporting that Farah was legitimate Other rather than “Plastic Brit”: he could be one of us, part of the “national club” (Carrington, 2000), because he had not come to Britain for sporting glory or funding, and he had been a recipient of British culture and

education. In this way Farah became the “perfect”, neoliberal migratory citizen: possessing the perceived best cultural attributes of Britishness, yet not taking advantage of the British state and its resources. This article demonstrates that, despite being supportive essentially of the athlete *as an individual*, media representations of Farah were rarely so straightforward, unambiguous or munificent in their insinuations about broader issues of race, Islam, immigration and citizenship. Throughout London 2012, portrayals were often partial and contingent, and at times contradictory and exclusionary, reinforcing racialized models of citizenship in twenty-first century Britain. Before analysing these media texts, the article contextualises Farah’s representation within the experiences of other minority ethnic British sport stars, and explores the conditions for his emergence as a multicultural icon at this particular time.

### **Race, religion and masculinity in the construction of the British sports star**

Mo Farah’s positioning as a black British Olympic hero is not without precedent. Throughout the early 1980s, black elite performers, such as track and field stars Tessa Sanderson and Daley Thompson, and boxer Frank Bruno, became iconic figures in the British sporting landscape (Carrington, 2010). In succeeding decades, athletes such as Kris Akabusi, Denise Lewis, Colin Jackson, Kelly Holmes and Linford Christie – alongside a gamut of male footballers and boxers – succeeded on the world stage. By this stage, victorious black British sport stars draped in the Union flag had become an unremarkable sight (Malik, 2002). This sporting symbolism, alongside broader shifts in racial formation and achievements in popular culture, was indicative of an emerging, confident black Britishness. While by no means endorsed and validated by all – whether that be minority or majority communities – this positioning illuminated a changing politics of post-colonial nationhood and the influence of a (sporting) ‘multicultural drift’ (Hall,

2000). Elite sport has become subsequently a principal sphere in which minority ethnic people can emphasise their Britishness and attempt to subvert, temporarily, racialized governmentalities of national belonging (Bruce & Hallinan, 2001; Burdsey, 2006; Carrington, 2013).

Associations between minority ethnicities and Britishness, whether self-identified or ascribed, have been rarely straightforward, however. Despite being lauded periodically by the media and political elite, and achieving popularity among the public, the inclusion of minority ethnic athletes has often been complicated and conditional. Sporting success is, of course, critical. Just as important is the performance of permitted, assimilationist models of ethnic identity (Back, Crabbe & Solomos, 2001; Burdsey, 2007; Carrington, 2000, 2001; Fortier, 2008; Gilroy, 1993), and the articulation of recognisable, ‘legible’ masculinities and femininities (Neal, 2013). This position entails stressing pride in “Britishness” and a conservative post-racial politics: talking down personal experiences of racism, rebutting the material consequences of racial inequality more generally, and (re)producing claims of sporting meritocracy. Crucially, these identity politics and dominant celebrations of hyphenated identities have led rarely to a cessation of racial discrimination, sporting or otherwise, highlighting the limits to what Giardina (2003) refers to as ‘stylish hybridity’. Indeed, the arrival of black male bodies as representative of sporting Britishness was accompanied by the exclusion of other communities of colour, especially women within them, via whitened, masculinised and heteronormative versions of citizenship (Hills & Kennedy, 2009; Samie, 2013; Thangaraj, 2015; Walton, 2010). Given his biography and intersectional ethno-religious identities, Mo Farah provides an original and enlightening case study, demonstrating both the novel and enduring forms of (sporting) racialized nationalism that are articulated in conjunction with minority ethnic sport stars.

During the London 2012 Games, much media coverage of Farah was characterised by a fascination with his “exotic” background, describing him as an asylum-seeker or refugee (or a son of one), and as having come to the UK from Somalia. These portrayals are inaccurate. While he was born in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, Farah spent most of his formative years in Somaliland (recognised internationally as an autonomous area of Somalia but self-declared as a *de facto* sovereign state) and the bordering country of Djibouti. He moved to the London borough of Hounslow in England with his mother at the age of eight, to join his father who had right to remain in the UK through his education and work (Farah, 2013). This confusion might be put down to an assumptive logic based on the fact that the vast majority of Somali migrants to the UK since the 1990s have been refugees (Harris, 2004). It also highlights narrow interpretations of black African migration in the UK and pejorative framings of the Somali community in particular. **It is perhaps more significant that such factual errors passed frequently unchallenged. A mythical migratory narrative remained intact, reinforcing contemporary political discourses on immigration, and endorsing neoliberal ideas about the “value” and expectations of different types of migrant bodies (see below).**

The connections between race and religion (as well as nation) for Somali migrants in Britain are complex. This makes an analytical or theoretical distinction between these subjectivities a difficult, and not necessarily useful, task (Ajrouch & Kusow, 2007). Nonetheless, in the context of dominant interpretations of the racialized sporting body in the Global North, Mo Farah appears to possess a paradoxical sporting corporeality, both physically and ideologically: an ethno-national identity (his East African heritage) that is perceived to possess a “natural” advantage in distance running, and a religious one (Islamic) that is believed widely to

circumscribe or inhibit sporting activity. The extent to which Farah's achievements subvert this stereotypical dialectic has received limited acknowledgement in media coverage. One explanation is that, although it was mentioned more than his ethnicity in press coverage during London 2012 (Ford, Jolley, Katwala & Mehta, 2012), his Muslim identity was not acknowledged widely beforehand. Up until then it had not been a central facet of his public pronouncements, while the only significant mention of Islam in his post-Olympics autobiography is a short reference to training while observing the obligations of *Ramadan* (Farah, 2013; see Khimji, 2012 for a rare discussion on his faith). Then there is the shortening of his name to the ethnically-ambiguous 'Mo'; the racial and religious heteronormativity of his conventional "Western" (read: monogamous) marriage and family structure (as heralded in the iconic scene with which this article began); and an absence of the corporeal and material markers associated with Muslim men in the Western imagination, such as a long beard or *taqiyah* (Nagel & Staeheli, 2008).<sup>5</sup> Finally, there are Farah's diasporic sensibilities, and current residence and training base in Portland, Oregon, which enhance further his sense of (middle-class) cosmopolitan, transnational identity and flexible global citizenship (Bruce & Wheaton, 2009; Giardina, 2001; Ong, 1999).

Aspects of Farah's "public" Muslim identity support normative framings of race, Islam, masculinity and citizenship in the UK, especially in relation to other British Muslim sport stars (see Burdsey, 2007 on Amir Khan, for example). Other features challenge and complicate these expectations. The elision of his religion in the public sphere therefore upholds the construction of the moderate, inaudible "good Muslim", while reassuring public fears in the current political conjuncture about the globally mobile Muslim who is able to transcend national borders (Rana,

2011; Thangaraj, 2010). Moreover, the particular masculine sensibilities of sport and the nation-state remain intact.

These nuances and complexities situate Farah as an important “text” for the sociological study of the racialized sporting celebrity. He is the most prominent contemporary athlete in the British context (and even beyond) who is black *and* a Muslim *and* a migrant (although these subjectivities are fluid and intersectional, rather than static and additive). Minority ethnic sports stars ‘are constituted by, and constitutive of, the politics of racial and national identity’ (Jackson 2004, p.123) and ‘the discursive construct of “the black athlete” becomes an important site for these various and varied struggles’ (Carrington, 2010, p.3). Furthermore, as a commodity, celebrity ‘is produced, consumed and interpreted in specific cultural contexts’ and ‘there are certain *qualities*...that permit [celebrities] to emerge in such magnitude at a particular historical moment’ (Bolognani, 2011, p.31). Such observations help to contextualise *how* and *why* Farah – who was, after all, far from the only minority ethnic member of Team GB – took on such significance *on this particular stage* and *at this particular socio-political conjuncture*.

### **Constructions and representations of Mo Farah in the British popular press**

The empirical data included in this article were generated through a systematic search of “popular” British newspapers for a six week period including the lead-up to the 2012 London Olympics, the fortnight of the Games themselves and the remainder of that month (August). Articles were collated via the UK Newsstand database and an internet search engine, using the search term “Mo Farah” in combination with “Britishness”, “race/racism”, “citizenship”, “nation”, “multicultural/multiculturalism”, “migrant/migration”, “Muslim”, “Islam”, “asylum”

and “refugee” (while the latter two terms are inaccurate, they were used in much reportage). A further search, using the same methods, was undertaken for the periods in 2011 and 2012 during which the “Plastic Brits” controversy emerged in *The Daily Mail*. Coding of the data led to the creation of the three substantive themes, which are explored below: 1) “successful” citizenship, politicised sporting narratives and hierarchies of belonging; 2) “core values”, the individual-national and the cultural politics of tolerance; and 3) the cultural politics of pride and the performance of (sporting) Britishness.

The following discussion is undertaken in line with the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) tradition. For reasons of space, a full explanation of CDA is not offered here (see Burdsey, 2007; Liao & Markula, 2009 for discussions of its application to mediated sporting celebrities). Briefly, this method explores the social and political issues entrenched in the production and content of (media) texts, as well as the social relations, assumptions and ideological positions that support them (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 2004). Fairclough (2010, p.4) argues that CDA represents ‘*not* an analysis of discourse “in itself” as one might take it to be, but analysis of dialectical *relations between* discourse and other objects, elements or moments, as well as an analysis of the “internal relations” of discourse’. CDA is more than a series of remarks or observations on the text; rather it entails some manner of systematic analysis. CDA is also normative, rather than just descriptive, in that it pursues social justice and highlights ways of mitigating or correcting inequalities (Fairclough, 2010).

*“Successful” citizenship, politicised sporting narratives and hierarchies of belonging*

Mo Farah’s sporting success, in conjunction with his personal characteristics, allegiances and proclivities, led to extensive approbations of his successful “transition” from migrant to British citizen. For instance, in *The Independent on Sunday* Cahal Milmo (2012) stated that Farah:

Represents a new kind of national hero who came to London as an asylum-seeker and worked his way up through the state school system. The skinny kid who arrived in Britain unable to speak English has the ear and attention of the powerful.

The wider repercussions of his migratory trajectories and subsequent contributions to Britain’s sporting achievements were also underlined, namely that he embodied the positive repercussions of British diversity. As Ian Birrell (2012) wrote in *The London Evening Standard*, ‘The likes of Farah...provide powerful demonstration of how much immigrant communities enrich our nation’.

Within these seemingly benign testimonies lies a discernible political discourse. In emphasising Farah’s individual accomplishments as a “successful” migrant citizen (notwithstanding the erroneous reference to asylum), Milmo also appraised positively the perceived broader possibilities available within contemporary British immigration and integration policies. In contrast, although Farah was portrayed as an individualised embodiment of a diverse and welcoming Britain, he was articulated rarely as a product, or beneficiary, of state *policies of multiculturalism*. This supports the neoliberal, post-racial position whereby such strategies and practices are now deemed divisive and unnecessary. The individual migrant ethnic Other has been accepted ostensibly into the national collectivity, and is shown to have succeeded within its structures and services. However, at the same time a restrictive model of citizenship and belonging becomes even more resolute. A dialectical process of establishing “patriot” and

“outsider” is achieved (Puar, 2007), with certain types of migrant made welcome but many others – those who are deemed to be *unlike* Farah – rendered undesirable. Farah’s identity and journey to citizenship is made palatable, while signifiers and discourses of the “threatening”, “unwelcome” or “illegal” migrant, or the “terrorist”, are displaced implicitly onto other racialized bodies (Andrews, 2000; Thangaraj, 2012).

Given assiduous popular efforts to deny the political attributes, motives and consequences of elite sport, especially the Olympic Games, the explicit politicisation of Farah’s impact was notable (see Carrington, 2010 for a broader discussion of this process). A range of discursive themes were employed, insinuating that public reception to Farah’s athletic success might signify the wider integration and acceptance of Muslims in the UK. Focusing on the Far Right, *The Times*’ Matthew Syed (2012) intimated that popular support for Farah offered a potent rejoinder to the exclusionary politics of the British National Party (BNP):

He is not merely dark-skinned, but also a Muslim, and is called Mohamed. Perhaps he is as far away from the BNP’s idealised notion of a Briton as it is possible to imagine. But he was cheered on – cheered in a way I have never before heard in a sporting venue – by 70,000 of his countrymen [sic].

Others referred to Farah’s potential interpretation among Islamic extremists. Writing in *Eastern Eye*, Amit Roy (2012) claimed that:

Without setting out to be a positive Muslim role model, [Farah] has become one. The manner in which he has been embraced by the British has probably convinced many a young would-be militant that perhaps there is a place for Muslims in this country.

Roy added that, ‘If groups like al-Qaeda ever had plans of attacking the Games, no doubt they thought better of disrupting several Muslim moments of triumph, including those of Mo’. This statement offers arguably a stark misinterpretation of the type of contemporary Islamist ideology in question. If anything, Farah’s status as an integrated citizen and moderate Muslim, plus the

latent viewpoint among some that life in the West and a career in professional sport are “corrupting” ideals, were actually *unlikely* to position his successes positively in the eyes of extremists. Either way, the quotation validates the claims made within certain constituencies before the Games that they might be targeted by Islamic extremists. **These predictions represented, again, an implicit critique of state multiculturalism.** In practice they facilitated the introduction of new anti-terror laws, increasing securitisation and the erosion of civil liberties for Muslim communities, among others (Silk, 2014). The above quotations trivialize the material inequalities and ethno-religious exclusion experienced by British Muslims, from government policies to everyday prejudice. The claim they can be overridden by brief public celebrations of one Muslim’s exceptional achievement **champions discourses both of neoliberalism and post-racialism: highlighting the positive repercussions derived from this individual citizen’s racial and religious subjectivity, while downplaying simultaneously the material consequences of these differences for other members of his communities.**

It is evident, then, that representations of Farah invoked not just those attributes that he himself is seen to signify; they also implicated those people from whom he is deemed different. These distinctions help to sustain nuanced ethno-racial hierarchies of belonging (Back & Sinha with Bryan, 2012; Puar, 2007). The positive construction of Farah as a “good” migrant/Muslim was often inseparable from the pejorative description of other members of his ethnic and religious communities (Asthana, 2012), while claims were made about a perceived absence of alternative (male) Muslim role models. For instance, fellow diasporic Somali, Ismail Einashe (2012), wrote in *Prospect* magazine that, ‘Mo’s greatest success lies in his full embrace of Britishness – something that is alas all too rare for young Somalis. Moreover, he is living proof that hard graft

can bring success'. This commentary linked the exclusion of young Somali men in Britain to a perceived failure to identify with Britishness. **Such identification is a key component of the move to post-racialism, both as a means of overcoming ethnic boundaries, and as a prerequisite for "good" citizenship, through distancing oneself from other "dangerous" or "undesirable" racialized bodies.** Furthermore, it was inferred that minority ethnic communities' occupational and economic marginalisation is the result of indolence rather than structural discrimination. Farah provides consequently a 'reassuring affinity with the affective investments' of British (sporting) culture (Andrews, 2000, p.177).

In *The Sun*, Oliver Harvey (2012) contrasted Farah with other Somali and/or Muslim young men too. He proposed that the athlete would have run potentially into a number of deleterious scenarios were it not for the white "saviour figure" of his physical education teacher and the assimilatory benefits of a new, sporting "family":

While some of his contemporaries drifted into crime, Alan [Watkinson] helped channel Mo's energies on to the track. Mo's agent Ricky Simms said: "Mo might have gone off the rails if it hadn't been for Alan's input. Athletics became Mo's family".

This emphasis on Farah's youthful migrant status casts his racialized masculinity as vulnerable, and in need of support and safety from the white, masculine, heteronormative British state – in this instance embodied by the sport industry (Andrews, 2000).

In the same newspaper, Jane Moore (2012) distinguished between Farah, and Farzana and Iftikhar Ahmed, a British Asian couple sentenced to life imprisonment in 2012 for killing their 17 year-old daughter, Shafiea. Like the examples above, references to language proficiency, and

the perceived cultural unassimilability and “anti-British” values of Muslim migrants were foregrounded:

Despite living here for nearly 30 years now, Farzana still barely speaks a word of English. This, together with the couple’s obvious disrespect – some might say loathing – for the country that welcomed them with open arms, makes them the complete antithesis of Mo et al.

Assimilationist governmental assertions about the importance of language proficiency for migrants were again reinforced, in spite of evidence demonstrating that meaningful integration also occurs via other social processes (Ahmed, 2014). Uncovering the politicised nature of these discourses is an important component of understanding Farah’s construction and representation in the media. As Carrington (2010, pp.3-4) argues, the widespread perception of sport as an apolitical entity ‘has had an important influence on not only black politics, formally understood, but more widely on how African diasporic peoples have viewed themselves *and* how these communities have come to be viewed’.

*“Core values”, the individual-national and the cultural politics of tolerance*

Writing in *The Daily Mail*, Daniel Hannan (2012), Conservative politician and Member of the European Parliament, utilised Farah’s triumph to reiterate the dominant political zeitgeist of “core values” and state-instigated models of Britishness. He stated that, ‘The Union flags now flying all over the country are totems of a shared loyalty that supersedes ancestral ties. Wherever our parents were born, we can be patriotic Britons by signing up to a set of common values’. This model of what constitutes “good” citizenship was introduced under the New Labour government’s Community Cohesion agenda at the beginning of the twenty-first century and has been reinvigorated by the current Conservative-Liberal coalition. Central to this ideology is the marginalisation of ethno-religious signifiers in the public sphere behind an emphasis on a

hegemonic notion of Britishness, manifest in declarations of loyalty, pride and the promotion of particular symbols of nationhood (see next section). Hannan continued that, ‘these are the precepts which make Britain a more agreeable place to live than, say, Somalia’. While a reference nominally to Farah’s birthplace, the inclusion of Somalia invites readers to acquiesce with dominant Western portrayals equating the country with Islamic insurgency, piracy, civil war and famine, and thus as the antithesis of Britain and British values. It also implies that migrants from such places are corrupt, problematic and essentially dangerous.

A lead article from *The Sun* (2012) proposed that the crowd in the Olympic Stadium, as much as Farah himself, epitomised a progressive politics of nationhood. It claimed that:

In the crucible of the Olympic cauldron, a new Great Britain is being forged. Proud. Confident. Successful. And above all, inclusive. Like those representing Team GB on the track in the Olympic Stadium on Super Saturday,<sup>6</sup> the 80,000 in the stands presented the genuine, multicultural face of these lands: decent, sporting, tolerant, fair-minded and free of bigotry or racism.

An editorial in *The Mirror* (2012) argued that, ‘this win for a son of Mogadishu was a victory for our oft-maligned multi-cultural society’, while British Prime Minister, David Cameron, tweeted that this was an achievement that ‘we can all be proud of’ (cited in Alibhai-Brown, 2012). Writing in *The New Statesman*, Alan White exemplified a post-colonial white saviour complex, inferring that Farah should be grateful to Britain and British people for his achievements, because they were somehow responsible for his journey from outsider to icon. White (2012) stated that, ‘at some point, this country took a misfit, and turned him into a national hero’. This theme continued elsewhere with the assertion that Farah’s personal achievement was actually a *national* sporting and political success. Neil Wilson (2012) in the *Daily Mail* stated that Farah’s ‘entire athletics career has been spent in Britain under its system of coaching and support. His

successes are Britain's successes'. Farah's standing as the "perfect", neoliberal migratory citizen was again championed. While he was perceived to be indebted to the British people— who have demonstrated their post-racial, welcoming nature by accepting him into the nation space – he was not regarded as having taken advantage of the *state*, for which other migrants are routinely criticised and demonised. In a similar infantilising portrayal, *The Sun's* Oliver Harvey (2012) remarked that:

When Mo Farah flashed across the winning line as Olympics 10,000m champion his instant, subconscious reaction was to fall to his knees and kiss the ground. To embrace the land that gave him succour when he needed help as a little boy.

In this instance, Farah's act of prostration was (mis)read in a distinctly different manner to those performed by other Muslim sportspeople (Burdsey, 2010), with any religious connotations replaced seemingly by those of national allegiance and gratitude.

The extrapolation of Farah's personal triumph to signify a narrative of national "multicultural" accomplishment was highly significant. Without a national polity that valued his achievements, claimed a role in facilitating their possibility, and articulated the discourse and practice of tolerance, the political capital of the story was bereft. Plaudits were given accordingly by the media to a stadium of predominantly white spectators – and by extension a state – that responded positively to the achievements of a solitary black, migrant, Muslim athlete. This provided a striking contrast to the widespread public anxiety in the lead-up to London 2012 around proposals by the Islamic *Tablighi Jamaat* movement to construct a so-called "mega mosque" for thousands of worshippers adjacent to the Olympic Park at Abbey Mills (DeHanas & Pieri, 2011). This disparity highlights how the politics of tolerance include a quantitative element, i.e. the size of the minority population to be tolerated; as well as a qualitative one, i.e. the specific identities,

corporeality and behaviours of the individual(s), plus sport's position as a supposedly apolitical and unthreatening realm. **In this regard, Farah's personal and diffident religious proclamations enhanced the post-racial desire for the privatisation of religious expression.** This scenario also demonstrates how 'performing tolerance on an international stage where it can be understood as a theatrical event (not real, a fiction)' (Hyland, 2014, p.272), does not necessarily extend beyond this arena.

Brown (2006, p.14) points out that 'almost all objects of tolerance are marked as deviant, marginal, or undesirable by virtue of being tolerated'. As such, tolerance is as much a *(bio)political* act as a moral one, representing a discourse and practice of governmentality that facilitates forms of ethno-racial regulation. Hage (1998,p.79) argues that those who purport to be tolerant are, like those who perform exclusions, actually engaged in a nationalist practice and reproduce accordingly 'the same imaginary position of power within a nation imagined as "theirs"'. Wemyss (2009, p.123) relates tolerance to 'the dominant white liberal discourse' around Britishness, arguing that it provides dominant communities 'the flexibility necessary to maintain dominance in the face of challenges from discourses associated with subordinate groups'. Brown (2006, p.28) adds that:

What is tolerated remains distinct even as it is incorporated. Since the object of tolerance does not dissolve into or become one with the host, its threatening and heterogeneous aspect remains alive inside the tolerating body. As soon as this ceases to be the case, tolerance ceases to be the relevant action.

Tolerance is thus a privileged position which disguises (racialized) power relations and the "tolerated" are viewed ultimately as something that the dominant group can control. As such, 'tolerated others are imagined by definition to be present within "our sphere of influence". They are part of "our" nation, but only in so far as "we" accept them' (Hage, 1998, p.89).

*The cultural politics of pride and the performance of (sporting) Britishness*

In her analysis of the construction of multicultural nationalisms, Fortier (2008, p.32) asks:

What is the relationship between the “I” who speaks, and the “we” it simultaneously speaks with, to, and of? How does the “I” – the individual, particularized body – relate to the collective “we” – the national body, the collective mass identification – in textual and visual displays of the self-declared proud Briton?

Identifying this dialectic with regard to London 2012, Falcoux and Silk (2010,p.171) point out that ‘the key framing of the bid to local publics was that support represented an act of “pride”; the British public was urged to “Make Britain Proud” and “Back the Bid”’. The public was informed that backing the campaign represented desirable, normative citizenship. Indeed, individuals were *responsible*, as neoliberal subjects, for engaging in affiliations and behaviours that were conducive to this hegemonic model of nationhood.

Such public proclamations are valorised especially when espoused by eminent minority ethnic athletes. These ‘declarations of pride function as personal testimonies, while at the same time the speakers are taken up as exemplary figures of multicultural, tolerant Britain’ (Fortier, 2008, p.24). In addition to verbal commitments, particular emphasis is placed on state-inscribed national symbols, such as flags. In *The Sun*, Jane Moore (2012) celebrated ‘a gold medal in the 10,000 metres for the devout Muslim who loves this country – his country – and proudly wrapped himself in its flag’. Similarly, Lindsay Johns (2012) wrote in *The Daily Mail* that:

Naturally, the sight of Mo Farah draped in the Union Jack after his two victories, a symbolic gesture telling of an ardent desire to integrate both as an immigrant and as a Muslim, was majestic, deeply poignant and hopefully far-reaching in its potency.

Allison Pearson (2012) in *The Daily Telegraph* summed up that, ‘You only have to look at the story of Olympic champion Mo Farah to see what can happen when a family embraces their new country’. Jane Moore (2012) pleaded that, ‘Let’s hope that, moving forward, the inspiring story

of Mo Farah teaches us all that whatever our ethnic background a pride in Britain can be our uniting force'. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (2012) added that Farah was 'a proud Londoner and a proud Briton, suffused with joy after winning in front of his home crowd', who 'while remaining a devout Muslim, extols his adopted country'. **These testimonies show how apparent engagements with signifiers of multicultural actually reinforce hegemonic "core values". Diversity adopts the properties of a 'container', facilitating a representation of this variability as cohesive body (Ahmed, 2012).**

In response to a journalist who questioned whether he would rather have competed for Somalia, Farah exclaimed famously, 'Look mate, this is my country!', and reiterated his pride in wearing the Team GB vest. Such interrogation reflects a tendency for his Somali background, rather than his West London upbringing, to be discussed in press coverage during the Games (Ford, Jolley, Katwala & Mehta, 2012). More broadly, **the question highlights the limits to post-racialism, with the inclusion of racialized Others remaining ever contingent. Despite Farah's claim to organic membership and "ownership" of a British identity,** public faces of modern multicultural Britain 'are always suspected of being more saturated by their ethnicity, culture, or religion, than the white British citizen is' (Fortier, 2008, p.35). There is no reason to doubt the veracity of Farah's rejoinder, but one might note his success at the 2010 Barcelona World Athletics Championships where he celebrated with the flag of Somaliland as well as that of the UK. This is perhaps less a shift in Farah's identity politics; rather, it is more about the restricted performative script available to him within the hegemonic discourse of Britishness articulated around London 2012.

This analysis of the cultural politics of pride in a sporting context demonstrates the importance of thinking about notions of difference, cosmopolitanism and tolerance *temporally* and *spatially* (Jazeel, 2011). The future is asked to do the work of the present in that a desired vision of what a sporting Britishness might look like is used as a substitute for the present. Problematic historical realities such as the role of sport in colonialism are ignored. The dominant discourse of pride also collapses its multifarious spatial manifestations in order to construct a singular, coherent narrative of Britain, which can be bounded within the safe, apolitical and neoliberal space of the sports stadium.

### **Conclusion: racing towards, or away from, a progressive politics of Britishness?**

This article has argued that Mo Farah's identity complicates normative framings of sport, race, religion and masculinity in Britain. As a consequence, the athlete is constructed and represented by the media using narratives that are familiar, palatable and reassuring to the public; and that sustain hegemonic models of nationhood and dominant ideologies around sport. These include his construction as a multicultural icon and embodiment of "successful" immigration policies; the displacement of race and religion from his subjectivity onto the bodies of other minority ethnic citizens; his positioning as a tolerable individual, whose achievements are really those of the nation itself too; and his identification with dominant symbols of nationhood. His skinny frame, soft-spoken nature and lack of physical prowess in a traditional sense also enable him to be distinguished from the "threatening" black athlete (Carrington, 2010; Hyland, 2014). He is seen to represent an alternative racialized masculinity, as highlighted in his role in television advertisements for *Quorn*, a meat substitute product.

At the end of the Olympic Games, optimistic acclamations emerged regarding the future of British race relations. *The Sun* newspaper (2012) claimed that, ‘The far Right are wasting their time. They have lost’. A *London Evening Standard* headline proclaimed, that ‘Mo Farah has sent a message of hope to all migrants’ (Birrell, 2012). *The Daily Mail* also dropped its “Plastic Brits” narrative once it recognised that it was out-of-touch with public sentiment and that all Team GB triumphs were celebrated regardless of the athletes’ personal backgrounds (Katwala, 2014). After the Olympics, a report by the *British Future* think-tank proposed that young people are thinking less about race and that Britain is moving towards being a more tolerant place (Ford, Jolley, Katwala & Mehta, 2012). Statistics show that, in England, minority ethnic groups are far more likely to describe themselves as exclusively British compared with white groups, and Muslims are four times as likely as Christians (Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity, 2013). In addition, two of the five Local Authorities with the highest number of residents identifying with Britishness were the Olympic host boroughs Newham and Tower Hamlets (Easton, 2013).

Past experiences remind us, however, that the inclusion, and influence, of minority ethnic sport stars is fragile and contingent. Claims about the decline of the Far Right and messages of hope to new migrants are inaccurate, not to mention disingenuous. Farah has spoken about the trouble he has with airport security due to his Mogadishu birthplace. He was also subjected to a backlash from the Far Right English Defence League (EDL) after donating money he won during his appearance on *The Cube* television game show to his own charity foundation in Somalia. Such exclusions apply structurally to the communities from which the likes of Farah emerge too. Less than a year after London 2012, the openly anti-immigration UK Independence Party (UKIP) returned 147 elected councillors and averaged 25% of the vote in the wards where it was

standing in English local elections. The following year it won 163 seats in local elections and won the overall popular British vote for the European Parliament elections. By 2014, UKIP had two Members of Parliament. The EDL also called on its members to mobilise in the wake of the killing of soldier Lee Rigby in London in May 2013, which British National Party leader, Nick Griffin, attributed to ‘mass immigration’ (Jones, Quinn & Urquhart, 2013). There was a marked rise in Islamophobic incidents, including assaults and attacks on mosques and madrassas. More broadly, increasingly draconian immigration legislation, surveillance of Muslim (and other) communities, scrutiny of overseas students and hospital patients, disproportionate stop-and-search of black youth by the police, and unexplained deaths of black men in police custody all highlight the disjuncture between the post-racial rhetoric articulated in relation to Farah and the realities of modern Britain (Harris, 2013; Renton, 2013).

Mo Farah’s success at London 2012 is not without wider positive repercussions. It contributed undoubtedly to a national “feelgood factor” in August 2012 and many people embraced the athlete. This article does not dispute the immediate effects of Farah’s triumphs. Rather, it has argued that the wider multicultural ramifications of these achievements are more conditional, ephemeral and limited than is widely suggested; and it has contested the assumed role of sport and sporting celebrities in facilitating an *enduring* progressive politics of nationhood. A British Social Attitudes survey shows that people stating they have some level of racial prejudice dipped during the 2012 Olympics. Yet, critically, this survey also highlighted a sharp spike after the event, with nearly one-third of Britons admitting to being racially prejudiced (NatCen, 2014). As Kim (2014, p.316) argues, ‘we should perhaps read [such athletic successes] as signs that race continues to allow the achievements of a handful of individuals by producing difficult conditions

for the racialised many'. The 2012 London Olympics and Mo Farah offered us a glimpse of what a multicultural Britishness *might* resemble. Their construction and representation in dominant political and media discourses also remind us what an assimilationist model of nationhood continues to look like, with celebrations of sporting multiculturalism leaving the broader structures of racialized inequality intact.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> According to the 2011 Census, over half of London's residents now identify as members of ethnic groups other than white British (Office for National Statistics 2012).
- <sup>2</sup> The *Home Counties* surround London in southern England. They are the most economically prosperous parts of the country and their populations are significantly "whiter" than the city of London.
- <sup>3</sup> *The Daily Mail's* editorial stance is conservative and right-of-centre politically. It purveys frequently overt anti-immigration rhetoric.
- <sup>4</sup> *Team GB* is the "brand name" of the Great Britain and Northern Ireland Olympic Team, used since its introduction by the British Olympic Association in 1999.
- <sup>5</sup> A *taqiyah* is a small, round cap.
- <sup>6</sup> *Super Saturday* is the term used by the British press, and widely by the public, to refer to the eighth day of the 2012 Olympic Games (4 August). Team GB put in its most successful performance since the 1908 Games, winning six Olympic gold medals on this day, including Mo Farah in the 10,000 metres.

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