‘An Epic Tale of England’: Atmospheric authentication of nationalist narratives

EPD: Society and Space

0(0) 1–18

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DOI: 10.1177/02637758211065758

journals.sagepub.com/home/epd **Robert Shaw and Michael J Richardson**

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Abstract

Kynren is an outdoor spectacular pageantry performance which tells a tale of England, drawing on myth and history, to make several claims about Englishness and Britishness. It does so in the political wake, first, of constitutional crises in the UK centred around Brexit; and second, of debates around heritage, empire, race and nation which have been driven by responses to the Black Lives Matter movement. These themselves are manifestations of broader, global trends in which populist movements have attempted to reassert state-legitimacy through nationalism, heritage and culture. This paper explores, how *Kynren* affectively presents and discursively performs a narrative which puts place and landscape, and specifically the place and landscape of the peripheral region of County Durham in which it is located, at the heart of nation. We argue that the ways in which this narrative is authenticated performatively through the spectacular affective atmosphere of *Kynren* show how and which nationalist narratives resonate most readily in popular culture.

Keywords

Nationalism, populism, authenticity, heritage, Englishness, place

Introduction

On July 2nd 2016, eight days after the Brexit referendum in which the UK voted in favour of leaving the European Union, 8000 spectators witnessed the debut performance of *Kynren: An Epic Tale of England*. The show was performed to an estimated 100,000 people in its first year and at the time of writing was starting its fifth, covid-19 delayed, season. *Kynren* is an outdoor theatre show, in the style of traditional public pageantry (Bartie et al., 2019), telling a story of England's history with particular attention to the local and regional history of the

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show's location, Bishop Auckland in County Durham. The performance occurs on a purpose-built stage-cum-landscape next to the River Wear, opposite Auckland Castle, and the cast consists of volunteers, a small number of professional performers, as well as several hundred animals with handlers. Shows last for two hours and are performed around dusk, ending with spectacular fireworks.

Kynren is an interesting phenomenon for several reasons; we highlight two here. First, although the timing alongside Brexit was coincidental, it nonetheless stands out as an attempt to tell a popular story about English and British national identity at a moment in which this is being contested. *Kynren* narrates this story with strong references to place, landscape and religion. This raises questions both as to the discursive content of the performance (what sort of Englishness is being presented? who is part of that sense of England?) and to the affective strategies of pageantry used to perform Englishness. These concerns have been heightened further since *Kynren's* launch in 2016 by the British response to the Black Lives Matter movement, which has in particular explored the persistence of colonial and racist pasts, the (lack of) portrayal of these pasts in heritage contexts, and which has resulted in reactionary backlashes, leading to a broader debate about race, empire, heritage and national identity in England and the UK.

Second, *Kynren* is of particular interest to geographers due to its use of memory, landscape and place in its evocation of English identity. Of note too is *Kynren's* location in a peripheral town within a peripheral region of England. In that sense, it functions to draw a 'left-behind place' (Finlay et al., 2018; Sykes, 2018) back into the national project, as part of the aim to tell an authentic tale that legitimizes nation in a moment of questioning. Moving from the empirical case to a broader argument, we want to argue for the importance of understanding both how and which narratives of nation and place are embedded within cultural projects, how these narratives are communicated in performances, and how they draw in post-industrial or other peripheral locations.

Authenticating national identity through performance

Nationalism and Englishness

A common theme of politics in the UK, and more widely in Europe and North America in the aftermath of the 2008 global recession, has been a questioning as to what counts as 'authentic' national identity. Such debates have emerged from stark social divisions, in which the coherence of the national project is threatened by increased gaps in wealth and quality of life between rich and poor, the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. This paper does not claim these divisions are new; rather, they have risen to the forefront as a response to the crisis of the nation-state (Virdee and McGeever, 2018). More specifically, the nation-state has always had at its heart a question of legitimacy; we remember Weber's classic observation that 'a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory' (Weber, 1946: 77). This definition places legitimacy at the core of what it means to be a state and identifies that struggles over this legitimacy often drive political action. As exacerbating income and class differences mean the state cannot rest claims to legitimacy on mutual support and growth, nationalism emerges as an alternative to fill this gap, allowing the state to cohere around questions of identity. With countries around the world seeing such division enhanced after the economic crisis post-2008, claims over an authentic national identity have come to the forefront, notably in the USA, Brazil and India, as well as many other smaller nations such as the UK. For this paper, *Kynren* acts as a case study for understanding how these identities are performed and

who is included in them. To achieve legitimacy, nationalist narratives must be authenticated. As we argue later in this paper, authentication is an important part of the movement from a performance of identity, through to a stronger and more forceful discourse. What is notable here is that the form of *Kynren*, the public pageant, is particularly well suited to this authentication as it claims to be both a (volunteer-led) performance of heritage as historical record, and fictional entertainment (Bartie et al., 2019).

Within the UK and England, these bigger trends in the crisis of the nation-state have manifested in two sets of issues. The first have been a series of constitutional questions about the ability of the UK to persist as a state, in the context of the Scottish independence movement, Brexit, and subsequent negotiations over the status of Northern Ireland. Within these, northern small-town England – such as Bishop Auckland – has become in public discourse a symbol of what has driven ‘Brexit Britain’ (Closs-Stephens, 2019: 6), reinforced through two electoral events. The first was when Sunderland, a city at the mouth of the river which flows through Bishop Auckland, became the first location to return results on the referendum night, becoming a well-remembered sign of the Brexit victory in the 2016 vote (Bromley-Davenport et al., 2018). Second, at the 2019 General Election, much attention was paid to the ‘Red Wall’ seats which moved from left-wing Labour Party to right-wing Conservative Party control, amongst which was the seat of Bishop Auckland, which had previously returned a Labour Party MP continuously since 1935 (Cutts et al., 2020). What Closs-Stephens (2019) argues – and what we would agree with – is that this discourse creates a false division between the ‘educated’ Remain-voting liberal metropolitan England and an ‘uneducated’ Leave-voting conservative small-town England. It homogenises the ‘Vote Leave’ demographic and often equates it to narrow-minded working-class ‘northern-ness’, which only further perpetuates resentment. This is despite Dorling’s (2016) analysis which has shown that middle-class, southern English voters were crucial to the successful Vote Leave campaign. *Kynren* stands out as a narrative of national identity produced both for and with participants from a northern small-town community whose views on nationhood are often presumed to be understood, rather than actively engaged with.

Second, the British iteration of the Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted the problems of memorialisation of racist, imperialist figures from Britain’s past. This has led to multiple heritage organizations (for example the *National Trust*, *English Heritage* and the *Victoria and Albert Museum*) examining both the imperial context of their collections, and the ways in which these collections are displayed. Intellectually, such steps have helped challenge what Fowler calls both the ‘deliberate and more unwitting amnesia and ignorance’ that had previously removed much English heritage from its global, imperial, histories (Fowler, 2020: 35). However, critics from the political right, including the governing Conservative Party and the bulk of national newspapers, have criticized such moves as anti-patriotic and anti-British, launching a self-proclaimed ‘War on Woke] which seeks to deflect English and British institutions from this scrutiny. Building on Gilroy’s (2005) conceptualization of ‘postcolonial melancholia’, Finlay et al. (2018: 16) argue that British national identity has neither recognised nor processed its imperial past, and that the privileges brought with this past are experienced and felt by many as inherent, natural, right and proper; as part of being-British. Geographically, the places of British heritage and rural life are imagined to stand apart from Britain’s colonial past and postcolonial present, despite – as Fowler (2020) compellingly argues – being both historically and contemporarily embedded within it.

Connecting these two themes together has been a tendency for often-liberal leaning commentators to displace accusations of racism and xenophobia away from Britishness and towards Englishness. Closs-Stephens (2019) points to the Parekh Report, written in

2000 by the Runnymede Trust think-tank, which rejects ‘Englishness’ in favour of a British ‘multicultural nation’. Here, British national identity tries to decouple itself from connotations with white supremacy, racism and imperialism, attaching those instead to expressions of an avowedly English national identity. Elsewhere, Higgins (2019: 281) has observed:

During periods when racism becomes more visible, scholars have tracked how a racist, white, working-class figure has historically served to shore up the moral legitimacy of more affluent, ‘colour-blind’, white subjects (e.g., Skeggs, 2005; Taylor, 2015). Through their transgressions, this guilty white figure enables the inverse position of white racial innocence.

In other words, there is a tendency for a European or British-identifying white liberal middle-class to ascribe racism to an English-identifying working-class, thereby washing its hands of the problem. In the UK, this manifests itself through an abandonment of Englishness to the far right, in favour of other terms and identities: British, cosmopolitan, Londoner, European, etc. Connecting Brexit and post-colonial melancholia together, then, we uncover a situation in which the imperial reality of the UK’s past and present is often disavowed in public discourse from both left and right, whereas Englishness – and particularly northern, small-town Englishness – is portrayed as either as a bastion of ‘common sense’ nationalism free from the wokeness of metropolitan elites, or as an uneducated racist dumping ground for negative significations from which the British state and middle-class would rather remove itself. In this paper, *Kynren* stands out as a rare attempt to create a popular tale of Englishness, produced from small-town Northern England.

Kynren also draws heavily on Christianity in its presentation of an English history. We will return to this, but it is worth noting here that this has long been used to add an historical depth to Englishness, bringing a sense of enduring or timeless nationalism. This is further enhanced as Palmer (2002) notes when these concepts are also tied into landscape. This discourse is perhaps best captured in William Blake’s lyrics for the English patriotic song *Jerusalem*, which speculates on a historical visit by Jesus Christ to England (“Was the Holy Lamb of God, on England’s pleasant pastures seen? And did the Countenance Divine, shine forth upon our shrouded hills”). This asserts that England (and Britain) have a long-standing centrality and importance in world history; in Blake’s time, this formed an important part of justifying the British Empire, presenting it as a continuation of English cultural importance (Lincoln, 2006), though such a meaning would have unlikely resonated with Blake himself (Fowler, 2020). In relation to the postcolonial melancholia described above, doubling-down on this historical depth at *Kynren* may be understood as placing Empire as one phase within English nationalist history, simultaneously showing its importance while also avoiding making it the sole justification for contemporary nationalism.

At this point we want to reemphasise that although in this connection of Englishness, Christianity, landscape and whiteness we find a discursive space in which overtly racist national identities have flourished, we are not suggesting that *Kynren* consciously promotes white supremacism, imperialism or any other form of xenophobia. We also note that while we critique some of the use of Christianity in this paper, we do not want to imply that all connections made between religion and nation need be problematic. Rather, what *Kynren* can help reveal is that in popular media or culture, these discourses which produce racist and supremacist nationalism are often considered largely apolitical and separated from their more negative connotations, while at the same time being considered somehow ‘below’ worthiness of critical reflection in academic circles (Edensor, 2002). There is then an importance in attention to events such as *Kynren*, particularly at a time when regional stereotypes are repeating themselves within a nationalist narrative. As Tomaney (2013: 658) put forward

in his defence of parochialism, ‘we need more detailed studies of real local identities, which avoid a presumption of disdain’. We suggest it is necessary to further investigate how white national identities are legitimated from performances outside of major metropolitan centres.

Authentication and pageant performances

Given the importance of a sense of authenticity for nationalism, and the turn towards understanding how nationalism is performed, in this section, we want to explore how authenticity has been understood in relation to performance, and how the form of the pageant enhances this. Authenticity has been explored in detail in tourism studies, where researchers have attempted to understand the centrality of the search for the authentic tourist practices (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1973; Shepherd, 2015; Wang, 1999), as well as being central to pageant performance as social history, as captured recently by *The Redress of the Past* project (see Bartie et al., 2019). MacCannell (1973) was the first to connect authenticity with Goffman’s conceptualisation of ‘performance’, in which social actors are conceived of as attempting to ‘control the impression’ (Goffman, 1971: 26) that others receive of them. Like Smith, we see *Kynren* not just as a performance or a place, but as both: ‘not the historic monument, archaeological site, or museum artifact, but rather the activities that occur at and around these places and objects’ (Smith, 2011: 71). What we are interested in, then, is how the acts of performing *Kynren* make it a place and site of authentication for nationalist narratives.

As pageant, *Kynren* is a form of ‘spectacular theatre’ (Wallis, 1994: 148), the power of which comes as much if not more from the aesthetic pleasure of the spectacle as from its content. Such pageants have often been arenas for popular retellings of national stories (Bartie et al., 2017), and *Kynren* continues such traditions. While public pageantry has often been described as ‘backward-looking and conservative’ (Bartie et al., 2019: 156), they also note that across history the purveyors of pageants have claimed their unifying cross-class appeal, and that such simplistic readings should be avoided. It is interesting to contrast the pageant as performed at *Kynren* with Niven’s reading of the performance of nation at *Alton Towers*, a theme park in England which draws from English folklore and mythology:

Spectrally inhabited by an overwhelming sense of void and absence, the English Disneyworld Alton Towers proclaims a barely literate symbolism of garbled history and local legend to its exploited masses, while concealing its real identity as a means of generating profit for a large and powerful aggregation of corporate interests. (Niven, 2019: 43–44)

Kynren shares many features with *Alton Towers*. Both happily present myth as historical narrative; both use a historical setting (Auckland Castle at *Kynren* and the eponymous ruined country house at *Alton Towers*) as a form of ‘cool authentication’ (more on this below) for their historical narrative and both have connections to global capitalist flows, *Kynren* through its philanthropic owner, the venture-capitalist Jonathan Ruffer, and *Alton Towers* through its owners *Prestbury Investments*, a global property investments company. Beyond this, though, it would be hard to throw the same accusations of barely literate symbolism, exploited masses and profit-generating aims at *Kynren*. As a pageant, produced with more volunteers than professional staff, telling tales of located mythical and historical events, *Kynren* brings with it both affect and meaning where, at *Alton Towers*, Niven finds emptiness.

This distinction can be explained in how pageants authenticate their narrative. Goffman writes that there is always a gap between the social actors’ ‘real’ selves and their performance

(s), even if this gap is often not a conscious one, as ‘the performer can be fully taken by his [sic] own act’ (Goffman, 1971: 28). The sociologically interesting question that this generates is to explore the ways in which performers attempt to cover the gap between their selves and their performances (p. 70): how do performers try, consciously or otherwise, to convince the audience that their performance is ‘real’? In conceptualizing authenticity, this leads towards questions not as to whether an experience is ‘authentic’, but instead as to how authenticity is produced (Shepherd, 2015).

Cohen and Cohen develop this in a call to study ‘the process of authentication’ (2012: 1296) in tourism studies. Authentication is ‘a process by which something – a role, product, site, object or event – is confirmed as “original,” “genuine,” “real” or “trustworthy”’ (p.1296). This influential paper argues for a need to distinguish between what the authors call ‘hot authentication’ and ‘cool authentication’. Cool authentication refers to the construction of authenticity based on official, sanctioned designations (‘national park’; ‘World Heritage Site’, etc.), while hot authentication is an ‘immanent, reiterative, informal performative process of creating, preserving and reinforcing an object’s, site’s or event’s authenticity’ (Cohen and Cohen, 2012: 1300). Moving from Goffman’s conceptualization of performance to Butler’s performativity (via Sheffelin), Vincett et al. (2012) argue for seeing the role of the performer as important in terms of authentication: ‘In the West, people tend to interpret performance to mean acting or illusion, implying that performance is not real or true. Shieffelin [2005] argues instead that performance “embodies the expressive dimension of the strategic articulation of practice”’ (130) (pp.277–278).

In other words, the authentication of the performance relies upon creating the sense that the performance and the performer are unified. This is helpful in bringing questions of authenticity to geography, as within the discipline theories of performances draw more commonly from Butler’s performativity than Goffman’s concept of social actors. For Butler, ‘gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence’ (Butler, 1990: 24). In other words, gender does not proceed and only exists in our acts of its performance and in the social regulation of these acts. Extrapolating from her work on gender, theories of performance and the self that use Butler argues that there is no gap between these two concepts: there is nothing to the self beyond what it does, what it performs. While conceptualizations of performance influenced by Butler have paid less attention to matters of authenticity, by combining the work of Cohen and Cohen (2012) and Vincett et al. (2012), we can show that how performance is understood as authentic remains an interesting question.

It should be noted that there is one space within geography where questions of authenticity have been more prevalent, namely in methodological concerns about the desire to be authentic towards one’s data, fieldwork experience or participants. Looking for a way to express authentic versions of participants’ voices is a fundamental reason for the embracing in geography both of qualitative research methods in general (England, 1994) and of both ethnographic (Butz and Besio, 2009: 1669) and participatory methods in particular (Pain, 2004). Of note, given our context, geographers have innovated methodologically and analytically with the use of theatre and performance to engage with participants and disseminate research findings, exploring theatre as a way of accessing and performing authentic voices. Within this area of work, we think particularly of the turn towards verbatim theatre as method in geography (Johnston and Pratt, 2010; Richardson, 2015). Raynor’s (2017) discussion of theatrical work in geography highlights the importance of words within this movement, both in terms of the researcher’s creation of words and the desire to bring participants’ words into academic outputs. The authenticity of participants’ voices in research is understood to be a result of the reflexivity and transparency of the performative

(re)construction of their words in research outputs, as part of what Raynor describes as “making a story” (p.194). Returning to pageantry, its positioning as the voice of the people speaks to a popular understanding of this form of authentication.

Kynren, and the (re)emergence of problems of nation, race and identity in the second half of the 2010s, for us reveal the importance of understanding authenticity in the production of national stories. As outlined, *Kynren* is an attempt to construct a popular tale of nation, through pageantry. As Edensor (2002: 50) notes, spaces of popular representation are likely to be considered ‘authentic’ in their depictions of nation. Pageants have a tradition of being used in such a manner; Cannadine refers to this as the ‘ornamentation’ of empire, arguing that ‘the British Empire put itself on display, and represented itself to itself, more frequently, more splendidly, more ostentatiously and more globally than any other realm’ (Cannadine, 2002: 111). In other words, at the height of empire, pageants were central to the project of how the British Empire saw itself, that is, how the project of Empire was represented within the UK, in particular on a popular basis. In making this point, it is worth noting that we use ‘popular’ in distinction to *both* ‘high culture’ and ‘activist/community/folk’ traditions, both of which have received more attention from geographers. While these notions have their origins in forms of problematic binary thinking, we follow Hall in understanding binary not as about the inherent features of any cultural output, but as a relational process through which unifying forms of class-based culture are positioned in relation to dominant/high culture (Hall, 1981: 236). It is in this ‘unifying’ element in particular that we distinguish popular culture from the activist/community/folk scenes, not because popular culture has inherent qualities that make it more unifying, but because of its contexts of production and usage (Edensor, 2002: 16). Here, we come back to the argument about pageantry as a form of popular entertainment which has (following Cohen and Cohen, 2012) some unity between the hot authentication that comes from ‘the people’ and the cool authentication that comes from the official sanctioning of state forms. Like the 2012 Olympic opening ceremony before it (Closs-Stephens, 2016) *Kynren* manages a merger of these, but its messaging and context come in a new national and global contestations over the popular and populism.

As pageant, *Kynren* relies heavily on what geographers have described as atmosphere. This concept has received extensive attention in geography recently so we will not review it at length here. What is important for our account is that atmospheres are the felt experiences of the dominant ways of inhabiting a place at any given time. They are felt ‘as some form of envelopment’ (Anderson, 2009: 3), in other words, atmospheres are sensed as surrounding the individual. While atmospheres are experienced through sensing, they are very material things: they emerge from how bodies and objects are held in relation to affects and discourses in a particular place (Pink et al., 2015). This placed element of atmosphere is important: strong or powerful atmospheres are found when practices come to dominate place through affective force: in other words, the practices which *take place* are those which have the capacity to shape the bodies and subjectivities within that place (Duff, 2010: 83). The concept of atmosphere helps us understand how historically, pageants have resonated so strongly with their publics, and as such have connected hot and cold authentication: ‘The stories in pageants rang true because they were based on strong, pre-existing and popularly understood traditions and versions of the past, and on understanding of local and national identity that were rooted in time and place’ (Bartie et al., 2019: 169–170).

This also accounts for their use in imperial contexts, bringing together local stories and ideas with national or imperial atmospheres (Anderson, 2016 connects both the localized use of atmosphere with this sense of atmosphere as a ‘mood’ of a particular moment).

Methods

Kynren's existence is primarily due to the philanthropy of investor Jonathan Ruffer, brought up in the northeast of England, who launched *Kynren* alongside a series of other heritage projects in Bishop Auckland. Here, we note that there is much more that could be said about this philanthropy, reflecting on the power it grants the philanthropist in a small town and the broader role of philanthropy in cultural/heritage or regeneration projects. These concerns interest us but fall outside of what can be contained in this article. Self-described as an 'epic tale' (note the link to Wallis', 1994 description of 'spectacular theatre'), the performance consists of a series of connected spectacular scenes illustrating mythical and historical moments. These scenes are performed by a cast of thousands, almost all volunteers, as well as by a menagerie of animals, animatronic special effects, fireworks, lasers, lighting and recorded music and narration. While the performance has varied slightly year to year, and actions from one scene sometimes bleed into the next, the performances watched for this paper consisted of approximately twenty scenes that span English history from a retelling of its mythical foundation by the biblical character Joseph of Arimathea, through to the youth-driven cultural revolution of the Swinging Sixties.

This paper draws primarily on the researchers' visits to *Kynren* in its first three summers, covering four performances (one in 2016, one in 2017 and two in 2018) and a further visit outside of performance time. Our methodology straddles discourse analysis and participant observation techniques, insofar as our main target of analysis is the performance of *Kynren* itself, rather than the visitor experience and audience response. As Leavy states, 'perhaps more than anything else, performance-based methods can bring research findings to life, adding dimensionality and exposing that which is otherwise impossible to authentically (re) present' (2015: 135). Our methods here are therefore attuned to how performance speaks to embodiment and spatiality. McAuley (1999) has pointed out for example, that the theatre is both site and object, and we would extend this description to account for *Kynren* as a form of theatrical performance.

Our approach came from both practical restrictions and methodological concerns. Methodologically, both researchers came to the project with an ethnographic mindset which aims to explore 'how people – together with other people, nonhuman entities, objects, institutions, and environments – create, experience, and understand their worlds' (Till, 2009: 626). As such, we were keen to see the performance of *Kynren* as an audience member would, incorporating the whole visitor experience into our analysis. However, in terms of our research questions, we were interested primarily in the performing, staging and content of *Kynren*. Therefore, we did not use methods such as interviews or focus groups that engage directly with the audience or local community for their perspectives on the event – such research would be valuable but would address different questions. At the first performance attended, the researchers took the role of audience members, taking few notes and absorbing the atmosphere and experience of *Kynren*. At subsequent performances, we took more detailed notes on the narrative and the structure of the performance. No recorded performances of *Kynren* are available to buy, and photography is not permitted on-site, so these notes form the basis of our analysis. Subsequently, we coded our notes, using these codes to develop the analytical themes that inform this article.

We add further depth to our data by collating all the Tweets containing the word 'Kynren'¹ that were available online between 29 June 2018 and 18 September 2018 – that is, covering the 2018 season of performances. An initial round of coding was done using NVivo, after which we carried out further manual coding. In using this dataset, we have not

differentiated between the purpose of the Tweets – for example, between audience Tweets, journalistic or reviewer Tweets, and advertising or promotional Tweets. The aim here was to get an overall sense of the discursive framing of *Kynren*, but it cannot be taken as a representative sample of *Kynren*'s audience, due first to the presence of paid-for promotional Tweets and second due to the specific demographic constitution of Twitter (Longley et al., 2015; Marwick, 2014). What this data does offer though is an insight into the discourse which circulates around *Kynren*, adding greater levels of intertextuality to our analysis.

Telling nationalist tales

Religion and the nation

Kynren begins in the 1960s, with a young boy (Arthur Verity) accidentally kicking a football into the windows of the bishop's palace. The bishop admonishes young Arthur, and asks him to return in the evening so that he might learn more of England's history, and thus gain respect for the land. On returning, Arthur is sent back in time to view the unfolding history of England, beginning in legend with the arrival of Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury with the Holy Grail as a 'symbol of Christian faith'. Arthur sees the Knights of the Round Table and meets King Arthur, assisting him in extracting the mythical Excalibur sword from its stone. Surrounded by pageantry and myth, the show depicts the chivalrous deeds of knights before cutting to the first historical event, the arrival of Julius Caesar and the Roman Army in Britain.

In these opening scenes, *Kynren* firmly locates the foundation of England in the mythical tale of Joseph of Arimathea. In the Christian Bible, Joseph was a follower of Jesus, who took his body down from the cross and arranged for his burial in the tomb from which Jesus was to be resurrected three days later. According to legend developed in the Middle Ages, Joseph subsequently travelled to England, founding Glastonbury Abbey and bringing Christianity to the British Isles, although there is no historical evidence to suggest that this happened.

The use of Christianity as foundational to Englishness has several effects here. It immediately frames the story in terms of what Vincett et al. call: "Performance Christianity," which highlights religious action in the everyday or secular, combined with a discourse of authenticity and a pluralistic approach to institutions and religious spaces' (2012: 275).

That is to say, *Kynren* both draws from the institutional authority of religion, in the figure of the Bishop and the associated palace, and from making the everyday English landscape one rooted in Christian mythology – a repetition of pageantry's dual-authentication from officialdom and landscape. There is an articulation of 'transcendent moral values' (2012: 165) through this appeal to the authority of religion. Christianity, as previously noted, gives a timelessness to nation (Lincoln, 2006; Palmer, 2002), presenting it as something eternal, God-given. Within *Kynren*, this is also important as it establishes in the opening scenes the Englishness and religiosity of the local area. Auckland Castle, the Bishop's Palace in Bishop Auckland, is directly visible from the audience seating area in *Kynren*, and as the show continues, other regional Christian figures make appearances. Of note, is the scene involving the Venerable Bede, a Doctor of the Church whose life is depicted as preventing the 'Dark Ages' – a historically discredited term – from reaching the north-east of England ('Dark Ages spread – but not here'). While there is significant historical evidence that the region was a centre of learning and writing during the Early Middle Ages, with Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (p.731) and the

Lindisfarne Gospels (pp.715–720) marking the height of this period, this scene is important in binding together place, religion, and nation, thus authenticating nation ‘down’ by place and ‘up’ by religion.

A note on our protagonist here. The name ‘Arthur Verity’ is not a not particularly subtle attempt at authentication, the name ‘Arthur’ referring to the legendary King Arthur of England and also useful as a long-standing English name, while the surname ‘Verity’ appeals to a sense of truth. *Kynren* tells a tale of ‘schoolboy’ historiography, a variant of ‘Whiggish’ history as described in the satirical *1066 and All That* (Sellar and Yeatman, 1930). It is thus not incidental that the protagonist is a schoolboy. Indeed we note that that the philanthropic founder and funder of *Kynren*, Jonathan Ruffer, was himself a schoolboy in the northeast of England in the 1960s. More broadly, this symbolises the positioning of a nostalgic English past, before the socio-demographic changes resulting from 1960s immigration to the UK from the former British Empire and later immigration from the European Union, at the heart of contemporary efforts to define English national identity. This has the effect of what Hirsch (1992) calls ‘postmemory’ – with the audience as witness, as the next generation to a simultaneously personal, collective and cultural remembrance to what has gone before. The very name of the show serves as a clue to its intention, as according to its website *Kynren* is ‘echoing the Anglo-Saxon word for generation’. More could be said about the significance of Ruffer’s philanthropy than this paper has space to cover, but acknowledging his Christian motivations is also important to understanding the performance. His philanthropy has included investing in the development of a (yet-to-open) Faith Museum at Auckland Castle, seeking to strongly develop the connections between faith, Britain and the Christian heritage of North-East England’s Anglo-Saxon Northumbrian saints and the Prince Bishops of County Durham. The authenticity of schoolboy history is located in the recognition by the audience of the myths, people and places involved. In this context, the nationalist narrative is reaffirmed by its reliance on an audience familiar with the historiography taught in mid-20th century English schools.

Heritage and arts together draw from a range of discursive and affective techniques to shape our understanding of national identity (Tolia-Kelly et al., 2016). In so doing, such performances are always partial – they tell certain histories and not others. Here, we note that Joseph of Arimathea, a Judean from contemporary Palestine-Israel, effectively becomes white-English, both through the literal portrayal in the performance by a white actor, but more importantly through his presentation as a founding father of England. While *Kynren* shares with Vincett et al.’s performance Christianity a sense that authentic religious performances must be located in the ‘hot authentication’ of the everyday, *Kynren* also attempts the ‘cool authentication’ by appealing to the authority of figures such as the Bishops of Durham or St Bede. In so doing the narrative of *Kynren* is one in which Englishness, the north-east landscape and Christianity are entwined. On the one hand, this has the positive effect of wrestling these concepts from far-right racism, which is welcome. In so doing, however, *Kynren* also authenticates these connections, wrapping Englishness in a white Christian heritage, which works to legitimate some of the later tales of British Imperial expansion.

Landscape and the nation

“Memory, service, love have rooted me in British soil”

Scenes 3 through to 6 all revolve around battle and military campaigns, with invasions of Roman, Viking and Norman troops all depicted. The words above are uttered by a Roman Soldier, indicative of the move slightly away from myth and towards land in telling the tale of English history. This connection between land and nation returns throughout the *Kynren* performance, embedded in the discussion of the coal mining industry, and repeated statements of love for ‘this land’. War and land are connected too, such as in the statement at the end of the English Civil War that there have been ‘so many wars, so much blood this land does not need a tyrant’.

Land and nation are often very closely connected, and this is a core part of *Kynren*’s narrative. Indeed, the stage at *Kynren* is dug out of the landscape, containing ponds and hillocks which allow the action to be separated, or different action to take place in different parts of the stage. Characters repeatedly declare their love for land and landscape, and the Roman soldier cited above is ‘anglicized’ by his encounter with landscape. Here too, we see elements of verbatim theatre being copied, with statements of national pride being placed in ‘everyday’ characters, implying a sense of authenticity. Geographers have written at length about the role of landscape in fostering national identity. As Crang and Tolia-Kelly (2010) argue, ‘landscapes often naturalise social values’ (p.2316); to appeal to landscape is to appeal to a sense of permanence. This is in *Kynren* a very rural landscape as well, drawing from a long history of imagining rural idyll as being at the heart of white Christian Englishness (Fowler, 2020; Palmer, 2002). In this way, the connection of nation and landscape is another attempt at authentication. Indeed, if the early scenes root the *Kynren* narrative in myth, religion and the unknown, the subsequent scenes then ground this narrative in landscape, and particularly in England’s north-east.

Within *Kynren*, nation is further tied to land through war. We return to Weber’s (1946) definition of the state as the sole source of legitimate violence within a territory; *Kynren* presents the evolution of the English and British states as the result of a history of the exercising of this violence, either to invade and bring improvements to the nation, or to defend the nation against external threats. By presenting an almost unbroken run conflict – there is between scene 3, the arrival of the Romans, and scene 8, the Anglo-Scottish wars, only one scene that does not centre on some sort of military conflict – *Kynren* presents a narrative in which contemporary England is an inevitable accumulation of these conflicts: hence, the quote given above that the land has seen ‘so many wars, so much blood’. As well as connecting into the schoolboy history that we have previously mentioned, the focus on war further authenticates the legitimacy of the contemporary state. This narrative of war is notable as disappearing later in the performance; as British wars become exported overseas in the age of empire, they also leave the English landscape and thus the narrative that *Kynren* seeks to tell. In the story of *Kynren*, landscape, people and conflict are presented as co-produced via an evolutionary, continuous process. Roman troops, Scandinavian Vikings and their continental descendants the Normans are all (like Joseph of Arimathea as previously noted) ‘made-English’ through their encounter with landscape, and positioning in the national narrative. Thus, a key role that landscape plays is to unify diverse peoples as (white) English, generating a legitimate single national tale.

Industry and the nation

Scenes 13–15 of *Kynren* tell the tale of the Industrial Revolution and Victorian-era England. In this section, the role of the North-East is emphasised through attention to rail and coal.

Relatively small towns, such as Shildon and Witton Park, are mentioned, giving this section an intimacy which contrasts with the ‘big’ narratives of nation that have come previously. Still, the role of industry in these bigger projects is not forgotten, as a miner declares “coal from my home town will keep Queen Victoria warm tonight”. Victoria too is very important in this part of the play, with scenes of actors portraying citizens from around the British Empire paying tribute to the Queen. With the exception of a single scene depicting a medieval fayre, these scenes are the first attempt to really portray any sort of social history.

As well as making the connection between landscape and nation, later scenes in *Kynren* tie Englishness to the Industrial Revolution, and the North-East’s role within this. Again, such narratives follow the schoolboy history that has been established within *Kynren*. The shift to something closer to ‘social history’ in the scenes dealing with more recent times has two major effects. The first is that this focus takes us away from the British Empire and its associated violence (Closs-Stephens, 2019). Empire appears in the tale, but only in the form of people conquered and complicit, acknowledging the British queen. While *Kynren* is generally successful at avoiding racism or cultural insensitivity, it is in its portrayal of the British Empire, where white actors dress in Indian and southern African clothes and pay homage to Queen Victoria, where it comes closest to racist stereotype. This, we argue, reflects the position of the Empire as an unprocessed moment in the national narrative of England and the UK, whereby critical discussions have had much less impact on everyday discourse (Gilroy, 2005).

The second effect of focusing on industry and the everyday in more recent periods is to better connect to the memories of both the audience and the participants. As previously noted, in Western cultures, authenticity in performance is often taken in terms of the extent to which we see the expression by the performer as authentic to them (Vincett et al., 2012). With a large percentage of the performers – and a significant part of the audience too – consisting of people from the northeast of England in general and Bishop Auckland in particular, the narrative connects these individuals directly to the places and people of the performance. This explains the sudden appearance of specific village and town names, as well as the inclusion of a scene depicting an early 20th century Durham Miners Gala. The Gala, itself a contemporary form of pageantry, was first held in 1871, consisting of communities from the colliery towns and villages of County Durham marching to Durham City under handmade banners. Despite the closure of all coal mines in County Durham, the Gala persists and is now attended both by marchers from the communities of Durham and by representatives of trade unions and coal mining communities from across the UK, attracting over 100,000 people each year with speeches by trade union and left-wing political leaders (Mellor and Stephenson, 2005).² Researchers have argued that the continued participation in this pageantry is an important part of local heritage and self-definition: it ‘is a community ritual that raises morale and reminds (or educates) those involved about the honourable heritage of mining and trade unionism’ (Stephenson and Wray, 2005: 192).

The Miners Gala’s inclusion in *Kynren* serves to connect performers and audience to the performance, to reemphasise the role of pageantry and performance in heritage and to connect *Kynren* into another contemporary regional event. Looking forward, it is also tempting to see in a narrative of British industrial ingenuity two contemporary political resonances. First, this story does not address the role of wealth acquired through imperial exploitation in Britain’s industrial revolution; rather, this is shown as the result of hard-work of British and specifically County Durham’s workers. Second, this narrative connects nation to the local and recent industrial past, authenticating the audience’s own experiences and collectively remembered histories. This opens out connections into the post-Brexit

future as well, fitting into narratives promoted by Brexit-supporting politicians of opportunities for increased manufacturing and trading on a global basis outside the EU. Here, then, the presentation of the industrial revolution as an Anglo-British project, located not in Empire but in places such as County Durham, becomes particularly important.

National forgettings

Any nationalist act of memory also incorporates acts of forgetting; as Suleiman puts it, ‘forgetting is the active agent in the formation of memory’ (Suleiman, 2006: 215). While forgetting is inevitable, attending to what is forgotten can be instructive. Foremost in the narrative is the masculinity of the tale again shared historically with public pageantry, which was described by the influential Louis Napoleon Parker as ‘a great festival of Brotherhood’ (Bartie et al., 2019: 170). Remembering that this is a ‘schoolboy’ history, we counted the performance as containing four named women – of whom all are queens – to 26 named men. While the performing cast has a gendered mix, the visible performers appear to take on traditional gender roles, with female performers having a higher representation in the ‘social history’ sections representing everyday life, and male performers having a higher representation in the military, religious and political elements of the narrative. *Kynren* is far from alone in this act of forgetting the role of female leaders in history, but nonetheless the extent of the gap is notable.

A further forgetting is the role of forces from outside England in shaping English history, particularly after 1066. We have mentioned the wider Empire, but the performance also contains no references to Ireland, one to Wales, and one scene in which the Scottish, who ‘refuse to accept the rule of England’, invade but are defeated at the Battle of Neville’s Cross, which took place in Durham. Moving beyond the British Isles, there is a depiction of the ‘Field of the Cloth of Gold’ diplomatic meeting between Henry VIII and Francis I of France, and then as previously mentioned a scene showing numerous British Empire subjects paying homage to Queen Victoria. Again, *Kynren* is not unique in its failure to address the British Empire or to acknowledge the multiple complex relations between the nations of the British Isles. In particular it repeats the English and British forgetting of Ireland; importantly, as Closs-Stephens has recently argued: ‘These histories of the protracted afterlives of Empire are deeply interwoven in “Brexit,” evident in the persistence of racialized dreams of white superiority as well as in the re-emergence of the “problem” of Ireland’ (2019: 5).

What is most important here, we argue, is what this reveals about wider English nationalist discourse. In creating an ‘authentic’ narrative, there is simply no need for *Kynren* to raise the role of women, of Welsh, Scottish or Irish people, of European neighbours, or of the colonised in producing England and English history. Indeed, authentication may be easier because *Kynren*’s active forgetting (Suleiman, 2006) of these groups fits with the remembered schoolboy histories that it is seeking to re-tell.

Affect, performance and authenticating atmospheres

With the previous section focusing on the discursive authentications of *Kynren*, here, we want to highlight how it functions as spectacle (Wallis, 1994). From a Viking longboat rising out of its artificial lake, through a medieval jousting competition, to a working replica of the first steam train, the performance has multiple spectacular set-pieces. The music, fireworks and sheer scale of the performance, which involves over 1000 human volunteers and numerous horses, sheep, ducks and goats, are impressive. From our database of Tweets, we found that ‘spectacular’, ‘epic’, ‘amazing’, ‘action’ and ‘great’ were among the top 30 most used

words to describe *Kynren*. In going for the spectacular, *Kynren* draws from the collective affective memory in the UK of the popular 2012 London Olympics open ceremony – indeed users on Twitter commented on the similarity: ‘Great night @kynrenuk The story of England, all done by volunteers that had the London Olympic opening ceremony feel to it. Tremendous spectacle on a beautiful night’. Geographers have started to explore how such events enrol audiences into nationalist sensations (Closs-Stephens, 2016; Merriman and Jones, 2017; Sumartojo, 2016). A key insight from these is that symbols of nationalism do not carry their power through an essential meaning; instead, they work because their affective relationship resonates with other symbols and discourses, producing an enveloping atmosphere. What is important about atmosphere for argument is that it forms part of how *Kynren* is authenticated.

Crucially, spectacular atmospheres reinforce the discursive sense of a transcendent, almost inevitable, white Christian English peoples. Spectacle encourages responses of wonder and amazement, closing down analysis and discussion in favour of sensed and shared affective responses. As with pageants historically, the aim is to impress rather than to tell. To take one area of *Kynren*, the lighting and fireworks fall into a long history of the use of light to create spectacle (Edensor, 2017). The value of such affective experiences ‘lies in their enduring quality’ (Duffy et al., 2011); they remain with the audience beyond the moment of experience in a way that the narrative of the show will not. This can be seen in the Tweets which were written by visitors:

#Kynren. Really enjoyed this epic history of England. Spectacular cast of over 1,000, animals, fireworks, lights, fountains & music. #BishopAuckland #mustsee #GreatNorthernShow #PuyDuFou #11arches

Just been to see #kynren at Bishop Auckland. What an amazing spectacle. So well organized and friendly volunteers. Loved every second.

A taste of ‘Kynren’ a wonderful spectacle of music and light on an open air stage – photographed by my husband last night. The rain held off this year which made it much more enjoyable.

Note in particular the final Tweet, in which the performance is described as a ‘spectacle of music and light’. Here, the content of the show does not appear in the writer’s summary of *Kynren*; it is the music and light which stays which the audience. This reminds us of Dewsbury et al.’s reflection that, in remembering the presentations at an academic conference, ‘what has slipped away are sentences, phrases, [and] what remains are materials, movements, shapes, gestures’ (p.437). Similarly, at *Kynren*, the meanings and ideas which are conveyed via the discursive regime of nationalism are authenticated most strongly by the atmosphere in which they are communicated, rather than by the individual statements and claims of which they consist.

These performances receive further authentication by the background which surrounds them. Returning to Cohen and Cohen (2012), these are something closer to the ‘cool authentication’ of official status. At *Kynren*, however, it is not the stamp of an official body which provides this authentication, but the volunteer status of the majority of the performers which provides this authentication. *Kynren* proudly boasts of a cast of over 1000 volunteers, mainly local but also including some who travel from across England to perform. Ruffer’s philanthropy also brings something of an outsider status; this is not a heritage-industry sanctioned project. In combination, this gives authenticity to the performance as it is seen as

coming from a ‘real’ community. As one Tweeter said, ‘it’s all about volunteering and the community’. *Kynren* is thus understood as a community product rather than as a state project, in other words, as something close to Edensor’s (2002) definition of ‘the popular’. At a moment of political populism, this becomes a valuable asset in the authentication of the narratives being told: the greater the distance from experts and (perceived) elites, the better.

Concluding remarks

Kynren has been a successful attempt to produce a spectacular, atmospheric narrative of English history. As a pageant, performed by volunteers, it draws from a schoolboy history of a white Christian England, (re)telling familiar tales that are authenticated through their location in place and landscape, and through recognition by performers and audience. Affectively, *Kynren* generates spectacle, staying with audiences beyond the performance itself. As viewers at the performance, we presume that we were not the only ones who noticed some of the various absences in *Kynren*’s tale – Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Europe, Empire, non-white people, non-Christians, women and no doubt more. Such absences may actually help the authentication of the narrative, as they repeat the common absences in recognisable myths. Under populist nationalism, then, recognisability – which in particular for *Kynren* is connected to place and landscape – is key in producing authenticity. This is not to say that the ‘cool authentication’ of officialdom was absent, or that populist nationalism is hostile to the state: far from it, as the presence of flags, kings and queens attest. However, this formal nationalism was less important than: first, the depiction of Englishness as emergent from a deep, white Christian heritage; second, an evolutionary history in which engagement with place and landscape anglicizes various invading peoples; third a story of social history which ties contemporary communities to the 19th century working-class, portrayed as the independent producers of the nation’s wealth; and fourth, the power of the spectacular components of *Kynren*.

As geographers, we find it interesting that *Kynren* is historically loose but geographically precise. This matters at a time when claims to senses of place have rarely been more politicised. In terms of future nationalist tales, particularly in the context of Brexit, *Kynren* is evidence of the continued relevance of popular culture as a source of authentication. It reveals the depth of challenge that may be faced when trying to unpack and reveal the imperial connections of the landscapes in which people locate their Englishness. Notably, questions of verisimilitude have rarely featured as a central concern for geographers. Yet, in this example, it is precisely the question as to which meanings and sensations of place feel most ‘real’ that matters. To the majority of its audience – certainly based on the atmosphere of the crowd, and supported by comments on Twitter – the circulation of narratives of place in relation to nation, religion and race, supported by the affective power of pageant, seem true, perhaps in ways that critical narratives which introduce empire, colonialism and exclusion into the conversation do not. As scholars, we both welcome the intervention of *Kynren* as more positive than overtly racist, supremacist and xenophobic accounts of (English) nationalism, but note that it ultimately does little to counter such stories. Instead, it reveals the ways in which populist nationalism sits in close proximity to a series of unquestioned systematic prejudices and blind spots, whose persistence lies in their generalized acceptance as true.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Due to the existence of a racehorse named Kynren, tweets containing the following words, all racecourses at which the horse competed during the search period, were automatically excluded: York, Newmarket, Doncaster, Sandown, Ascot. A total of 615 tweets were captured, a further 13 of which were removed as clearly referring to the horse.
2. Fifteen leaders or acting leaders of the Labour Party, have spoken at the Miners Gala, most recently Jeremy Corbyn in 2019.

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