This paper addresses the difficulty of conducting research about non-white racialised persons while working within predominantly white academic institutions. Specifically, I examine how to conduct research without representing Black bodies as a fixed, exoticised Other that is oppositional to a disembodied white Self. To do so, I use double consciousness alongside Black feminist work on dialogues as a methodological framework to centre Black Muslim women as knowledge producers. This novel approach moves away from simply describing (and fixing) racialised bodies to a particular performance/experience, and instead explores how performances shift as we negotiate different bodies, objects, and spaces. The paper advances discussions in critical race studies and the ethics of geographical research by illustrating how the situated experiences of the researcher and the participant are embedded in processes of knowledge production: I look to subvert the fixing of racialised bodies as deviations from the normative white background of academia.

**KEYWORDS**
Black feminism, dialogue, double consciousness, normative whiteness, race and higher education, research ethics

1 | **THE WHITE BACKGROUND OF ACADEMIA**

I feel most coloured when I am thrown against a sharp white background. ... Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. (Hurston, 2000, p. 96)

I've often thought about the above quote by Zora Neale Hurston in relation to how knowledge is produced within academic institutions: her words expose an ethical quandary with developing research about persons racialised as non-white against the “sharp white background” of academia.

This paper responds to my ethical concerns with conducting research about racialised minorities within academic institutions that perpetuate normative whiteness. In doing so, the rest of this introduction outlines the “sharp white background” that I struggled with through my work on the clothing practices of Black Muslim women in Britain. Second, I examine how the racialised Other has been constructed as oppositional to whiteness. Following this, I extend work on double consciousness and dialogue by bringing these concepts together and using them as methodological tools to explore the relationship that Black Muslim women have to this (white) Self/(black) Other binary.

My research with 21 Black Muslim women in Manchester and Sheffield (ages 18–51) arose from the dearth of work about our experiences (Johnson, 2019). Research on British Muslims focused primarily on Muslims with South Asian heritage (e.g., Brown, 2006; Phillips, 2015), while research about Black communities and religion focused on the role of Christianity and Black churches (e.g., Harris, 2006; Knowles, 2012). By centring Black Muslim women, I focused on how...
these processes meet and shift across different spaces. Through a methodology inspired by Black feminist dialogue – and the use of clothes journals\(^1\) and interviews – I highlighted how Black Muslim women’s performances shift as we negotiate different objects, bodies, gazes, and spaces.

In line with wider feminist critiques of objectivity (e.g., Haraway, 1988), I intentionally used “us” and “we” to situate myself within this grouping of Black Muslim women. This is done critically, much like Collins (1990) when positioning herself within the African-American women that she researches: terms such as “they” and “their” imply an ability to distance one’s racialised and gendered embodiment from the academic writing that one produces (Noxolo, 2009). This does not assume that my situated experiences within this “grouping”\(^2\) would negate the unknown ways that power permeates the research process in the omniscient manner assumed by the “goddess” trick (see Rose, 1997). This is illustrated through my interactions with Laila: for the first 25 minutes of Interview 1, she responded with short answers until I decided to end the interview.

Me: So that’s pretty much it for questions for this interview, do you have any questions for me?
Laila: Yeah
Me: Ok, go for it.
Laila: So… [picks up the list of questions and turns the recorder to point at me] How long have you lived in Sheffield? [She laughs]
Me: Erm, are you serious??
Laila: Yeah
Me: Ok [I laugh]
Laila: I’ll not ask you any of those questions cos I think, I don’t know if you’re bored with it or not. [She laughs]
Me: No no, I’m ok with any questions that people want to ask, cos, like, you know, like fair enough.
Laila: I just wanna know more about you, you can turn off the recorder now if you’re
Me: No no no, I’m cool, like what do you wanna know specifically?
Laila: Like, tell me your life story [she laughs]
Me: My life story, goodness me. (Laila, 25, Manchester)\(^2\)

When she initially turned the recorder and asked the first question, I remember feeling thrown by the role reversal that she enacted. Yet in that movement the dynamics of the interview were made apparent, as well as the space that I had been afforded throughout the conversations I had with other Black Muslim women. Despite my attempts to share my own experiences (as part of my commitment to dialoguing), I still decided when to speak and when to take a step back and just listen. This is not to say that participants could not choose when or how they wanted to share their own experiences (as evinced by Laila’s short responses to the questions posed prior to the role reversal). Nonetheless, the power that the interviewer has when asking questions and choosing when to share answers should be exposed. My ethical commitment to centring the experiences of Black Muslim women needs to be situated within the wider hierarchies that structure the interviewer–interviewee relationship, and that separates the researcher from the researched.

This researcher–researched separation became all the more apparent as I began to share some of this work with different academic audiences: I was (and am) acutely aware of the absence of Black (and/or) Muslim women from these academic spaces. This is felt viscerally as I attended conferences and seminars with more pictures of Black and Brown people on the presentation slides than Black and Brown scholars present in the room. It is in these moments that one becomes starkly cognisant of Suhaïymah Manzoor-Khan’s words: “to be a Muslim woman is to be the picture, but never the painter” (2018, n.p.). Even as I attempt to address the absence of Black Muslim women from research claiming to speak about our existence, I have to attend to how this work is situated within the racial hierarchies that inform knowledge production within academic institutions. In other words, am I performing as a modern-day academic native informant (see Khan, 2005); going out into the “field” to record the clothing practices of Black Muslim women (and through that, my own body) for the consumption of these institutions that reproduce normative whiteness and confine our bodies to the racialised Other? Given that it was the knowledge shared among Black Muslim women that spurred my initial interest into conducting research, perpetuating the objectification of Black Muslim women (and myself as a part of this grouping) led to several anxious conversations with other scholars of colour about my/our role within academia (see Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Pizarro, 1998).

This reflects a tension that I address through this paper: how do I conduct this research without fixing Black Muslim women as Other within a (white) Self/(black) Other binary? To paraphrase Zora Neale Hurston (2000), is it even possible to do this work without throwing our racialised bodies against this sharp white background that makes one feel most coloured? How can I research shifting and complex experiences of being without re-inscribing “the researched into the dominant representations of powerlessness” (Bhavnani, 1993, p. 30)?
This paper is not offering up a “solution” to the racial hierarchies that are evident in academia, nor am I proposing a universal methodology that could (or even should) be applicable to everyone conducting research with people racialised as the non-white Other. Rather, this intervention illustrates the importance of developing methodologies which can expose the white background of academia that I and participants have to negotiate in different ways. This contributes to work on the ethics of geographical research and critical race studies, while also illustrating the importance of researchers moving beyond declarative statements about one’s racial, classed, and gendered positioning. We need to develop critical methodologies that examine structures, including the structuring of academic institutions that fix (non-white) racialised bodies as deviations that stand out against a white background. In other words, I am interested in mapping out how I went about researching the ways that we “remain ourselves” despite how our beings are “surged upon” and “overswept” by racist systems that centre and neutralise whiteness.

2 | CONSTRUCTING THE RACIALISED OTHER

Bilge provides a useful definition for the normative whiteness that is evident within the walls of academia:

[I untie] whiteness from skin colour, physiology, or biology, and [understand] it as: a structurally advantaged position (race privilege); a (privileged) standpoint from which White people view themselves, others and society; and a set of cultural practices that are considered ‘unmarked’ – yet unmarked only if viewed from the perspective of normative whiteness. (2013, pp. 412–413, emphasis in original)

This understanding of normative whiteness as leaving white bodies racially unmarked sits firmly alongside the critical whiteness scholarship that works to unsettle the very erasure of whiteness. Notably, Tate traces the racist logics that inform the UK academy even as “racism attempts to hide its material, corporeal, carnal and psychic effects” (2016, p. 73).

I am particularly concerned with how normative whiteness is entwined with the work done within Geography: after all, Geography is “one of the disciplines that Europeans used to discover and define others and their worlds” (Thomas cited in Kobayashi & Peake, 2000, p. 394; also see Noxolo, 2017). In Decolonising methodologies, Smith succinctly critiques the “complex ways in which the pursuit of knowledge is deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices” (2012, p. 2). For example, Immanuel Kant (who taught at the University of Königsberg on the connections between race and climate change) wrote that “humanity has its highest degree of perfection in the white race” (Kant cited in Kobayashi, 2014, p. 1103). This is indicative of the intertwined histories of the discipline of Geography and justifications for colonisation through the “science” of race (Kobayashi, 2014; Yusoff, 2018).

Although the discipline has developed beyond this imperialist thinking, it is important to note how the boundaries between the majority non-white researched Other and the majority white researcher are maintained. That is not to say that there has been no contestation over what the discipline is or could be: rather I look to understand how the structures of the academy perpetuate normative whiteness, even as various scholars push these boundaries. For example, Bonnett (1997) points to British geography scholarship on race from 1950 to 1990 and how the bodies that were “raced” were those positioned as non-white. Through this manoeuvre, whiteness was “removed from the realm of debatable ‘racial’ categories, placing it outside history and geography and onto the essentialist terrain of unchangeable nature” (Bonnett, 1997, p. 195).

Recently, there has been a move to engage with decoloniality in Geography, illustrated through the 2017 RGS-IBG theme “Decolonising geographical knowledge: opening geography out to the world.” Numerous scholars have already addressed my concerns with this decolonial turn if it is not accompanied with a “politics of radical change” (Esson et al., 2017, p. 385; see also Jazeel, 2017; Noxolo, 2017). After all, despite significant research about people that are racialised, the knowledge producers within (UK) academic institutions are still disproportionately white (Desai, 2017; Equality Challenge Unit, 2015). This division perpetuates a separation of the (white) disembodied academic Self from the (non-white) racialised and objectified researched Other. Buruciaga describes this as “a mutilation of the human being, an objective of the ruling class who have us convinced that there are people who are ‘head’ and people who are ‘hands’” (cited in Pizarro, 1998, p. 64). Puwar (2004) notes the sedimented relationship between the white male body and academic institutions: when people racialised as non-white and white women enter these academic spaces (which they have historically been excluded from), they are positioned as Space Invaders.

It is this sedimented relationship between the white male body and academia that informs my understanding of the “sharp white background” of academia that makes Black and Brown scholars so visible as deviations. Beyond academic institutions, we can also reflect on how non-white racialised bodies are demarcated as deviant within societies that perpetuate normative whiteness. Fanon points to the racist histories attached to his Black body when a white child looks at him and exclaims “Look Mama, a Negro! I’m frightened!” (2008, p. 84). Du Bois alludes to how one’s Black body is produced
in relation to a white gaze as he reflects on the pauses in conversations which ask “how does it feel to be a problem?” (2007, p. 7). As Carter says, “writing about blackness can so easily reduce Black people to idealised historical victims whose lives are only as important as their legibility to white audiences” (2018, p. 42).

Although the Self/Other binary is useful in illustrating the distance that is assumed through our positioning as not (white, liberal, male), it also ends up homogenising several experiences of Othering into one category. This can risk re-centring normative whiteness instead of centring the voices and experiences of racialised persons. The focus on Othering “paradoxically risks eliding the very range and play of cultural differences that the designation is intended to represent” (Fuss, 1994, p. 22).

The logic of this Self/Other binary is not only reflected through the Other’s distance from the Self, but also through internalised notions of “genuine” Blackness and/or Muslim identity (Tate, 2005; Young, 2000). The theorisation of the veil, both in the context of the Algerian war that surrounded Fanon (2004), and in recent debates (around its symbolism as oppression or piety) highlights how these processes can be internalised and used to exemplify “genuine” or “faith-full” Muslim women (Dwyer, 2008).

I must therefore avoid falling into the trap of fixing processes of Othering onto the body: there has to be room to examine how our identity performances shift across different social situations and spaces, and how our beings are more than just oppositional to a white Self. This is articulated through Crenshaw’s (1989, 1991) coining of intersectionality to address the erasure of Women of Colour from social discourses around race (that focused on men of Colour) and gender (that focused on white women). Although I ground my own work (on the erasure of Black Muslim women from discourses around race, religion, and gender) within this understanding of intersectionality, I still needed to develop a methodology that could help me explore how processes of racialisation shift across different experiences of Blackness. This is a necessary part of exploring our many different experiences of being, and pushes against fixing a homogeneous Black Other against a white background.

3 | DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS AND DIALOGUES

Double consciousness sets up this missing language by highlighting how Black Muslim women relate to the Self/Other binary. Within such an understanding, the Self (as constructed through white hegemonic discourse) is a category that we were never meant to inhabit (and at best, can only mimic). Simultaneously, the Other is a category that fixes notions of Blackness, whether through internalised “community” notions of authenticity or through its construction as not Self. Neither of these fixed sites are able to show the fluidity of our relationship to both of these sites, nor how we take this on board through our being (Black Muslim women) across different spaces.

Double consciousness is not about freedom from one state of being and subsequent entry into another – an essentially chronological plot of identity. Instead, double consciousness presents – and this is its peculiar ontological strength – a state of being defined by the refusal to choose between opposed identities, be it those of the ‘Negro’ and the ‘American’ that [W. E. B. Du Bois] describes or those of the contending discourse that subvert its description. (Cooppan, 2005, p. 304)

Double consciousness offers an understanding of the presentations of Black Muslim women in Britain who negotiate processes of Othering and yet are not (and cannot be) wholly defined as Other (against a white background). Through this, we can explore how Black Muslim women (and People of Colour more broadly) respond to these categorisations and negotiate identities beyond a binary that could never explain the fluidity of our different presentations.

This is not to say that the structures that produce the white background of academia can be dismantled by using double consciousness. Rather, double consciousness can be used as a methodological tool to assist in researching experiences of racialisation as more than a fixed Other. This necessitates paying attention to the structures that produce normative whiteness within academia, without fixing our bodies as wholly defined through being “thrown against” normative whiteness. Our experiences of being (Black Muslim women) are much broader and more complex than this oppositional positioning.

In line with this, I use dialogical thinking to frame interactions between myself and research participants as an opportunity to share different knowledges about our lives and experiences of racialisation. Although dialogical thinking has been addressed across a variety of literatures (e.g., Collins, 2000; Denzin, 2009; England, 2008), I draw from Black feminist writings to think through the potentials of dialogues within my work.

[... Dialogue] is not about rubberstamping or negating other perspectives, it is about searching and learning, through repeated confrontation between incommensurable points of view. (Noxolo, 1999, p. 87)
Through this process of “searching and learning,” my own embodied positioning (as a Black Muslim woman) is negotiated as a part of the research process. There is no single experience of Blackness that is “discovered.” Instead, our different experiences of being racialised can be spoken to and learnt from:

Asiya: I've got a lot of things off my chest
Me: Ok, is that good?
Asiya: Yesss. Because, yes, I work with other Muslims, but ... there's some very ... you know it's non-existent that I get to talk to some other Black Muslims especially other African Muslims who understand Black issues. [...] So it's nice to just ... meet someone else who understands, and we can just rant about it for an hour and a half and be like ‘yeah, it's so wrong how they treat us, yeah, yeah.’
Me: [...] It's the same whenever I meet other Black Muslims and you can talk about all of these things in togetherness. Because sometimes when you're with Black people, they'll only wanna talk about Ferguson,4 but they won't mention the Islamophobia Muslims are facing, or when you're at the mosque and they'll be like ‘pray for Syria,’ but like they'll forget about Nigeria or Sudan or Somalia.
Asiya: Yeah, that's quite annoying to be honest. It's like ‘hello! We're here too!’ (Asiya, 23, Sheffield).

Through this interaction, Asiya and I think about the similarities and differences across our experiences. These conversations are informed by an ethics of caring, where we can be “centred in one's own experience while being empathetic to the differential positioning of the partners in dialogue” (Collins, 2000, p. 245). Both Asiya and I reflect on these interviews as an attempt to push back against the marginalisation that is felt. Within this, there is an important recognition of one another through the exclamation “We're here too!” “We” becomes a way to recognise one another as experiencing that marginalisation, and connecting through these experiences. That is not to say that our experiences of being Black Muslim women are the same: rather, we recognise each other's experiences as a part of (and not just marginal to) Blackness and Muslim identifications.

Within this context, bell hooks refers to Black feminist dialogue as “the sharing of speech and recognition” (1989, p. 6). Yet the sharing of experiences does not necessarily mean that a sense of commonality will be uncovered. For example, I recounted a racist experience (a few days after the Charlie Hebdo shootings) at a bus stop to a participant, Cookie. Cookie immediately read it as an encounter that took place due to anti-Black racism, which made me pause. When noticing my hesitation, she clarified, “no, when those things happen to you in public, it's because of the skin.” Both Cookie and I were looking to read our embodied knowledges onto the encounter. Because of Cookie's self-positioning as experiencing anti-Black racism rather than Islamophobia, she read my encounter as existing within such a context. Yet for me, this encounter was layered with the knowledge of the increase in (reported) Islamophobic attacks following the Charlie Hebdo shootings (Travis, 2015), as well as conversations with my sister who feared walking home without using a hooded sweater to hide their headscarf. It became an extension of a wider discussion about the terror of Islamophobia (Jameela, 2018).

Neither of these interpretations were more “accurate” than the other: work on intersectionality has already taught us how the “cause” of an event may be read in multiple ways, and as a function of several overlapping forms of identity categorisations (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). However, the process of dialogue drew out these different understandings of our presentations. Through dialogue, meanings about our experiences are built together and there is an intentional focus on how we present ourselves through our interactions (with one another, and with the other clothes, objects, bodies, and spaces that we are describing). This is an implicit critique against knowledge claims that enable the researcher to remain disembodied: rather, dialogue highlights how knowledge is produced through embodied interactions. One participant referred to this as a process wherein “we've kinda both combined what we've thought or come across” (Hind, 26, Manchester). Dialogical thinking involves a commitment to unpack our differences and similarities through the interviews and the research more broadly: this highlights our multiple performances as we negotiate different processes of racialisation.

As I have written elsewhere, I am wary of how “‘dialogue’ or ‘co-production’ can be used to mask the need to redress structural inequalities” (Johnson, 2018, p. 22; emphasis in original). Notably Hawthorne and Heitz address the limitations of dialogue within the academy, wherein “the academy can itself be a site of violence that regulates who [and how one] can participate in scholarly dialogue” (2018, p. 150; emphasis added). This is why I borrow from Black feminist work on dialogue: it presupposes a form of dialoguing that challenges the erasure and objectification of Black women specifically, and Women of Colour more generally.

We must therefore account for how research is conducted within these institutions that reproduce normative whiteness, while also challenging the dynamics that construct the disembodied (white) academic Self as distant from the researched (non-white) Other. This understanding of double consciousness and dialogical thinking means focusing on Black Muslim
women as knowledge producers: it means recognising that the white background of academia is not neutral in its function. It creates the inequality that locates our Black Muslim bodies as bodies “in the field” from which “data” can be retrieved and transformed into knowledge by The Academic. Challenging the white background of academia must be done through both recognising the role of normative whiteness in the research that we produce and challenging the institutional norms that inform our research production.

Yet it is not enough to simply point to the racist hierarchies that structure knowledge production within academia. Seeing this discussion as unfinished and continuously developing is a vital part of recognising the long and difficult task of dismantling the white background of academia. Specifically, declarations of “reflexivity” and “positionality” cannot be the end goal in and of themselves. One of the dissonances that I am particularly concerned with is the number of scholars who write about racialised non-white persons without (consistently) challenging the marginalisation of those very same non-white people from academic spaces of knowledge production. Any engagement with reflexivity can only be a first step towards an urgent political call to challenge the structures that reproduce normative whiteness within academia.

4 | BEGINNING THE WORK

This paper has explored some of the contradictions that I confronted while conducting research on racialised minorities within academic institutions that reproduce normative whiteness (i.e., the disembodied “white background” of academia). These wider racial hierarchies perpetuate the distance between the white researcher Self and the non-white racialised researched Other. This fixes Black Muslim women as deviations from the norm and cannot explore how – in the words of Zora Neale Hurston – “I remain myself.” Our beings are continuously developed through our interactions with other bodies, objects, and spaces: research needs to examine these interactions rather than fixing our bodies as an exoticised Other oppositional to a neutralised white Self.

Thus, this paper is really about orientating myself (and the reader) towards beginning our work in academia from this interrogation of the neutrality of whiteness. I use the phrase “beginning the work” with some trepidation as I am wary of how repetitive conversations about racial justice can be (Johnson, 2018) – both within and beyond the academy. Yancy (2018) points to how the promise of inevitable progress is used to keep anti-racists waiting for a brighter future that is always out of reach: this also reflects my apprehension about how claims of decolonisation and equality and diversity can be used to discuss racial justice as an abstract eventuality rather than something that needs to be addressed now. However, rather than waiting for eventual progress, the call to “begin” from this sharp white background is about orientating ourselves to face the racist logics that remain pervasive within and beyond the academy; it is about understanding how these racist logics (and the various tactics used to delay racial justice) are connected to ongoing racial violence.

That being said, I am wary of presenting any neat solution to the racist hierarchies that persist within higher education institutions. In presupposing the white background of academia, I use double consciousness and dialogues as tools to pay attention to the differences and contradictions across experiences of being Black Muslim women. This paper thus makes particularly important contributions to the framing of research ethics as I ground my methodology within a critique of racial hierarchies in the academy. This succeeds in connecting literature on the ethics of geographical research to work on the construction of race.

By extension, there needs to be a challenge to the way knowledge is legitimised through these academic institutions. Even as publications like this one are designed to be a measure of our academic productivity, I also know that these cannot be the only spaces wherein I develop knowledge and think through these questions and ideas. Given the vast majority of Black Muslim women are not located within these institutions, my own focus cannot be limited to these spaces that perpetuate our positioning as marginal. In other words, rather than trying to fit within a framework that perpetuates the objectification of Black and Brown bodies as deviations from the (white) norm, I need to move beyond seeing my work as only (or predominantly) fitting into these academic spaces. Writing for (and connecting to) this wider community enables me to remember that our existence is more complex and nuanced than represented through our positioning as researched objects. It assists in fending against the isolation that keeps us feeling “most coloured” against a sharp white background.

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ENDNOTES

1 Within the clothes journals, participants recorded all of the clothes worn over a four-day period.
2 All participants chose their own pseudonyms.
3 I use the term “veil” intentionally here instead of hijab or headscarf (see Hamzeh, 2011), as it speaks to a politicised reading of the headscarf as a veil (e.g., being “hidden” from sight, inviting questions about whose sight the veil is preventing).
4 At the time of this interview, Michael Brown had been killed by a police officer in Ferguson, launching protests in Ferguson and around the globe through the Black Lives Matter movement.

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