Getting comfortable to feel at home: clothing practices of black Muslim women in Britain

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the role of comfort as an affective encounter across bodies, objects (namely clothing) and spaces. I focus on how bodies that are marked as strange and a source of society’s discomfort negotiate this positioning through the presentation of one’s body. What does it mean for these bodies to be comfortable or uncomfortable? This question is answered through work done with Black Muslim women in Britain. By exploring how comfort is felt in relation to racially marked bodies, this article develops work on emotional geographies. Comfort is understood as both an emotional product and process that changes as bodies move across different spaces. In noting this movement, I also explore how boundaries around the body (enacted through e.g. the multi-dimensional hijab) presents a particular form of territorialisation that facilitates comfort as we present our bodies across different spaces. These boundaries can be both a source of comfort and discomfort through their positioning as deviant from social norms. In understanding the different roles of boundaries, I explore the social processes that construct comfort (or discomfort) as we move through different spaces. This is intertwined with furthering work on Muslim geographies by challenging the overwhelming focus placed on ‘public’ facing garments like the headscarf and abaya. Such a focus limits an understanding of the fluidity of Black Muslim women’s identities, and how these changes in our clothing practices affect and are affected by the relationships built across spaces.

Ponerse cómoda para sentirse en casa: prácticas del vestir para las mujeres negras musulmanas en Gran Bretaña

RESUMEN
Este artículo analiza el rol de la comodidad como un encuentro afectivo a través de cuerpos, objetos (especialmente ropa) y espacios. Me centro en cómo los cuerpos que están marcados como extraños y como una fuente de incomodidad social negotiate este posicionamiento a través de la presentación del propio cuerpo. ¿Qué significa para estos cuerpos estar cómodos o incómodos? Esta pregunta se responde a través del trabajo llevado a cabo con mujeres musulmanas negras en Gran Bretaña. Al explorar cómo la comodidad se siente en relación a los cuerpos marcados racialmente, este artículo desarrolla trabajo sobre geografías emocionales. La comodidad es entendida tanto como un producto emocional como un proceso que cambia a medida que los cuerpos se mueven a través de diferentes espacios. Al notar este movimiento, también analizo cómo los límites alrededor del cuerpo (representado a través, por ejemplo, del hiyab multidimensional) presentan una forma particular de territorialización que

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facilita la comodidad cuando presentamos nuestros cuerpos a lo largo de diferentes espacios. Estos límites pueden ser tanto una fuente de comodidad como de incomodidad a través de su posicionamiento como desviados de las normas sociales. Al entender los diferentes roles de los límites, analizo los procesos sociales que construyen la comodidad (o incomodidad) a medida que nos movemos a través de diferentes espacios. Esto está entrelazado con avanzar el trabajo sobre geografías musulmanas al desafiar el arrollador énfasis puesto en las prendas "públicas" como el hiyab y la abaya. Tal enfoque limita una comprensión de la fluidez de las identidades de las mujeres musulmanas negras y cómo estos cambios en nuestras prácticas del vestir afectan y son afectados por las relaciones construidas a lo largo de los espacios.

逐渐像在家一般舒适：黑人穆斯林女性在英国的衣着实践

摘要
本文探讨舒适作为身体物件（亦即衣着）与空间之间的情感遭遇之角色。我聚焦被标记为陌生与社会不安来源的身体，如何透过呈现自身来协商此一位置性。这些身体舒适或不适意味着什么？我透过与英国的黑人穆斯林女性从事的研究来回答上述问题。本文透过探讨舒适如何在与种族化标记的身体关係中被感受，发展情绪地理学的工作。舒适同时被理解为情绪的产物与过程，在身体于不同空间之间移动中改变。我透过记录此般运动，同时探讨身体周遭的界限（藉由多重面向的面纱上演）如何展现我们在不同空间中呈现自我身体时促进舒适的具体领域化形式。这些疆界透过置放作为社会常规的异类，同时可作为舒适与不适的来源。我在理解疆界的不同角色中，探讨我们在不同空间中移动时建构舒适（或不适）的社会过程。而它透过挑战过度聚焦诸如面纱和长袍的“公共”蒙面布料，与穆斯林地理学的未来研究相互交织。此般焦点，限制了对于黑人穆斯林女性身份认同的流动性，以及这些在我们衣着实践中改变如何影响空间中建构的关係并受其影响的理解。

Getting comfortable at home

Realistically I only go through 3 clothes changes during the day [I laugh] and two of those are back or into pyjamas. Cos you know, as you've gathered, when I get home? It's pyjama time. (Asiya, 23, lives with mother and 3 sisters)

Asiya says what many of us (whether Muslim or not) know to be true – we often change in and out of different clothes during the day, and these changes are done in relation to the different audiences and spaces that we engage with (Woodward 2005). Despite a commonplace understanding that these changes are made, research on Muslim women has overwhelmingly focused on the specific clothing practice of the headscarf and its role within public spaces (e.g. Bilge 2010; Lewis 2009; Mirza 2013; Secor 2002; Tarlo 2007). This ignores how these changes signify a fluidity of performances beyond Muslim women's visibility in public spaces. Asiya's statement pushes for an understanding of the different meanings made within and outside of her construction of home. What is it about her home that creates a space conducive to 'pyjama time'? Why does 'pyjama time' end when moving outside of home, and what does this signify about the differences in the way these spaces are constructed in relation to her racialized and 'visibly Muslim' body?

This article works through how Black Muslim women experience this fluidity and negotiate our positioning in different spaces by critically engaging with the possibilities within comfort. As Black Muslim women in Britain are represented as a source of society's discomfort (i.e. part of those deviating from the unmarked norm), this article focuses on how this positioning is negotiated when we attempt to get comfortable (i.e. get in 'pyjama time') through this context of home. Clothing practices are thus focused on analytically as they present our bodies within constructions of home.

Through understanding our negotiation of different audiences and homes, I explore what it means to be comfortable, and to note one's discomfort as a racially marked body. In doing so, research on emotional geographies is moved forward by interrogating how different registers of power effects
experiences of comfort (Tolia-Kelly 2006). Comfort is an affective encounter between our bodies and the audiences, objects and spaces which we negotiate. Here, I move forward with Ahmed’s (2014a, 148) understanding of comfort as a ‘sinking feeling’ where ‘bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies.’ Comfort is a sensation that is situated within work on emotional geographies. It is both the product of this affective encounter as well as the process through which the sensation is produced. As we are positioned as out of place, the possibility of ‘sinking’ into places is called into question. This discomfort can also be produced through the clothing we wear that marks us as ‘visibly Muslim,’ to borrow a term coined by Tarlo (2010). To understand how that visibility is negotiated in different spaces, I use Ahmed’s work on ‘wiggling’ to create more room to get comfortable through the home (Ahmed 2014b).

Research on geographies of home has troubled the notion of home as necessarily a closed space deemed solely private in the binary relationship of private vs. public (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Brickell 2012; Johnston and Valentine 1995). This public/private binary has been challenged by feminists, but a commonplace definition used within this article explains that ‘private space refers to the home and the domestic, whereas public space is ‘external’ to the home, encompassing not only the sites of government, work and the market, but also everyday non-domestic spaces like streets, parks and commercial venues (e.g. bars, shops and cafes’) (Gorman-Murray 2006, 56). Rather than focusing on the home as part of the private, feminists have illustrated how the home is ‘constructed out of movement, communication, social relations which always [stretch] beyond it’ (Massey cited in Brickell 2012, 226). However, there has been a conflation of comfort with this process of home making, a conflation that literature challenging the heteronormativity of home has already pointed to (e.g. Gorman-Murray 2006; Johnston and Valentine 1995).

This public/private binary is not my analytic focus, as there is already significant research that discusses this relationship between public and private spaces that are negotiated by Black (and) Muslim women (e.g. Dwyer 2008; Hamzeh 2011; hooks 1989; Tarlo 2010). Instead, I focus on how comfort and discomfort is negotiated through constructions of home. Comfort/discomfort speaks to affective encounters across different spaces that cannot be neatly slotted into either side of public/private binary. This provides a needed departure from the privileging of this binary when understanding performances of identity, continuing the work of emotional geographies in redrawing public and private boundaries (Harding and Pribram 2002). This also untangles the conflation of comfort with notions of home by using ‘homes’ as a context to develop understandings of comfort further. By focusing on what it means to get comfortable, I argue for a re-thinking of the relationships that construct these places and that stretch beyond their specific locality. In short, this article notes how comfort as a process is produced through the context of home making, but also how comfort moves beyond this.

The centring of Black Muslim women in Britain to understand comfort also advances work on Muslim geographies. Most research on British Muslims conflates this category of religious identification with the experiences of British Muslims with a South Asian heritage (e.g. Dwyer 1999; Modood and Ahmad 2007; Werbner 1996). When research is done with Black Muslims in Britain, focus is placed on the immigrant experience (e.g. Berns McGown 1999; Fábos 2012; Hopkins 2010), overlooking how relations with different nations might alter between (and within) different generations of ‘migrants.’ This article focuses on 20 Black Muslim women who self-identify as ‘(b) Black,’ and identify (to different extents) as having hereditary connections to African and Caribbean countries. This is not to reduce the diversity of subjectivities within this grouping; indeed one of the main tasks of this project is to explore the differences (and similarities) in our positioning. Rather, this interrupts the collapsing of Muslim bodies into a specific form of ethnic categorisation. This is essential to understand how our racialisation, religious identity, class, gender, etc. is constituted and alters (or not) across different bodies.

To explore how comfort (within this context of home) is negotiated by Black Muslim women in Britain, I structure the article as follows. First, I note methods used and introduce some of the clothing practices that will be reflected upon throughout this piece. Then I review the broad literature within which discussions around comfort, home and clothing practices of Black Muslim women is situated. This sets up three events used to think through questions raised by these literatures: First, the process of ‘getting comfortable at home’ and taking off one set of clothing. Second, finding comfort within
spaces through processes of identification; and finally, understanding the disconnect felt when ‘home clothing’ is taken outside the home and the possibilities of wiggling to get comfortable.

On methodology

The experiences analysed have been taken from research with 20 Black Muslim women in Manchester and Sheffield. Manchester and Sheffield are two post-industrial cities in Great Britain that have established Black Muslim communities and newer migrants, with Manchester having a larger proportion of Black Muslims (Office for National Statistics 2013). However, it is not the demographic of Manchester or Sheffield as cities that is important: this is an exploration of how these micro-scale performances incorporate understandings (or rather, negotiations) of ‘home.’

It is this fluid presentation of identities that is discussed through the use of interviews and clothes journals (where participants were asked to record all the different clothes worn over a 4 day period). These journals provided a nuanced understanding of the temporality of our clothing. The clothes that participants wore in these different spaces were explored further through interviews. Rather than using public performances to fix the visible Muslim body, journals illustrate the changing nature of clothing practices. This develops comfort by connecting the presentation of our bodies to the extent that we feel able to ‘sink into’ these spaces.

Participants were asked to choose their own pseudonyms and these are used throughout this article, alongside their age and the members of their household. Although this article is looking explicitly at notions of comfort and home, this negotiation of comfort through the home is done in relation to the bodies that are seen within the home, with different forms of comfort achieved in relation to different household members and places (see Datta 2009).

In relation to work by Black and postcolonial feminist academics (Collins 1990; Khan 2005; Noxolo 2009), I use the terms ‘us’ and ‘we’ critically to position myself within this category of Black Muslim women, disrupting the assumption that my lived experiences as a racialized and gendered body can be divorced from the academic writing that has been produced from this positioning. This disruption is not constant as assumed by those Rose (1997) criticizes for performing the ‘goddess trick’ wherein the power dynamic of the interviewer-interviewee relationship are assumed to be laid bare; instead it is an attempt to further understand ‘how particular identities are weighted and given importance by individuals at particular moments and in specific contexts’ (Valentine 2007, 15). One example of this complication includes distinctions made between I as the researcher and ‘them’ as participants, signalling my own shifting performance as an embodied Black Muslim woman and yet also (by virtue of my positioning as the researcher) apart from the group of women who are being interviewed.

As certain terms are continuously used, there are two images that I would like to introduce: that of an abaya, a long-sleeved loose-fitting dress worn by Mistura (Figure 1), and a shiid, a loose-fitting cotton dress worn by Khadijah (Figure 2).

![Figure 1. An abaya (Mistura) – Taken 20/04/2015, Manchester.](image-url)
These images have been included as they assist in turning the gaze back onto us as consumers of the hypervisual ‘Muslim’ clothing rather than re-enforcing their positioning as static or homogeneous clothing practices. The images used here were negotiated with the participants and reflects what they felt comfortable sharing with ‘the public’ (particularly when clothes worn were associated with a sense of comfort at home). Through these images Khadijah and Mistura negotiate how to re-present the female body, expanding work on how ‘selfies’ and self-portraits assist understandings of women’s and girl’s performances of self (Piela 2013; Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz 2015). Both women sent images whilst at home with their faces already cropped out of the photograph, reflecting points to be unpicked later about the boundaries that individuals set up around how to present themselves in different spaces. Cropping their faces out of the photographs sent to me (and by extension, sent to a wider public audience) illustrated which audiences can/cannot see within these boundaries constructed around home.

**Comfort, clothing and home**

This research draws from work on home, clothing, critical race studies and Muslim geographies to push an understanding of the construction of spaces through affective encounters forward. By focusing on the sensation of comfort, there is a reworking of literature on how racialized bodies use different clothing practices across different spaces (but also specifically within constructions of home).

Critical research on Muslim fashion has illustrated the many different garments and styles that Muslims are engaging with in public spaces, dispelling the myth of the homogeneous ‘veiled’ Muslim woman (e.g. Lewis 2009, 2013; Tarlo 2010). However, there is a significant gap around how these clothing practices might change in relation to the home, illustrating the way in which these garments are still positioned through their role as externally facing (i.e. through their ability to mark a body as visibly Muslim in public spaces). This risks reducing the diverse meanings behind these clothing practices back to this homogeneous labelling of clothes and bodies as visibly Muslim and therefore the ‘strangeness’ worth noting within society.

Noble (2005) has notably questioned how ‘strangers’ (i.e. those positioned as ‘different’ from the unmarked ‘norm’) are made to feel ‘comfortable’. Using this language of the stranger reflects how specific differences are invited to represent a difference that cannot be overcome in even the most tolerant multicultural social imagination (Ahmed 2000; Ang 1996). Although research on Muslim fashion has shown the different colours and styles adopted by young Muslim women, it has shied away from engaging with the clothing practice of the black abaya. This re-inscribes the black abaya as a practice that is still perceived as too ‘strange’ when compared to the hip, colourful bricolage that some young

![Figure 2. A shiit (Khadijah) – Taken 08/11/2014, Sheffield.](image)
Muslim women in the West (and elsewhere) engage with (e.g. Lewis 2009). By focusing on a diversity of clothing practices (including the black abaya), I interrogate the different ways in which Muslim bodies become known as visible. This is explored by understanding how our bodies might be positioned as ‘strange’ and the manoeuvres made in relation to this.

When thinking of how the stranger is theorised through its positioning as Other to the unmarked white male body, Ahmed (2000, 52) notes that the white male body ‘comes to matter through the reduction of other bodies to matter out of place (=strange bodies).’ Within this, the white male body enables a public comfort. As Ahmed (2014a, 148) notes, this norm illustrates an ability ‘to be so at ease within one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view.’ When our bodies are situated as out of place in relation to this unmarked norm, the ability to find this ‘sinking feeling’ which enables one to ‘be so at ease’ cannot be assumed. Noble (2005) asks readers to flip the positioning of the ‘stranger’ from an objectified Other to our subjecthood. Once recognising that our bodies do not enable this public comfort, I push to understand how this status as a source of society’s discomfort is negotiated by Black Muslim women. This is done through highlighting the fluidity of our self-presentation, not just within public spaces, but through homes.

This speaks to Fanon’s ([1952] 2008) recollection of his positioning as a dangerous stranger to the white child exclaiming ‘Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!’ and how this caused a sense of dislocation and discomfort. Processes of Othering exist in explicit violence in public spaces but also in the discomfort experienced through one’s visibility as ‘strange’ (as matter out of place). In focusing on comfort whilst flipping the position of strangers, this article moves beyond current work on both these fields of research. How do bodies that are visible through their ‘strangeness’ find comfort i.e. spaces where their bodies can/do fit?

Comfort was initially constructed within the home as providing ‘a sense of place and belonging in an increasingly alienating world’ (Brickell 2012, 225). In the 1990s, this was complicated, questioning whether the home as a workplace for many women provided the same comfort that was assumed by binary masculinist understandings of the home vs. work or private vs. public. Research on geographies of sexuality suggested the home (as a space that privileges heteronormativity) could be a place of alienation rather than creating the sense of comfort implied by much of the literature (Gorman-Murray 2006; Johnston and Valentine 1995).

This reflects the tensions between speaking of home as a structure and the process of making a home, a tension that Wise attempts to unpick:

[... It] is crucial that we separate the ideas of home and the home, home and house, home and domus. The latter terms in these pairs of contrasts are proper, normative, and may have little to do with comfort. Indeed, the home may be a space of violence and pain; home then becomes the process of coping, comforting, stabilizing oneself, in other words: resistance. (Wise 2000, 300)

Here, Wise works through how homes might stretch beyond the physical house structure. There is still a narrow construction of comfort through home, ignoring how comfort is negotiated in different parts of the home as well as outside of the home (as structure) more generally (e.g. Holliday 1999; Jayne and Ferenčuhová 2013). One example of a specific site to ‘get comfortable’ is illustrated by bell hooks’ (1989) reflections on the kitchen as Black women only spaces imperative to the sharing of knowledge and experiences that led to her finding her own voice.

This process of comfort making is not just about a home (or homes) but the negotiation of multiple experiences of comfort/discomfort within and outside of the home.

Being comfortable – as in comfortably off – implies a lack of necessity to worry about the world or one’s position in it. Comfort is an easy, unthinking state. (Holliday 1999, 489)

This definition of comfort implies a stable category that can eventually be achieved. Instead, I argue that comfort might also mean being aware of one’s discomfort and the use of boundaries around the body to act and move through these spaces. Thus, comfort may not always be associated with this ‘easy, unthinking state’; it could mean finding ways to be by constructing boundaries through our clothing...
practices as we move and construct home spaces. In exploring this, I push to understand the complexity
in the way our bodies relate across different spaces including different experiences of ‘ease’ or ‘unease.’

In working through the complexities of comfort, this work situates itself within emotional geog-
raphies and uses this to expose a critical gap within emotional and affective geographies. Although
debates around the uses of affect within emotional vs. affective geographies is beyond the scope of this
article, Tolia-Kelly (2006) points to the inability within both literatures to understand the power dynam-
ics that effect the production of a body. After all, ‘a body that is signified as a source of fear through its
markedness cannot be free to affect, and be affected similarly to one that is not’ (Tolia-Kelly 2006, 215).
By understanding the relationship affect has to processes of racialisation, I challenge the flattening out
that occurs when little attention is paid to how affect is intertwined with the valuing of bodies, objects
and spaces that produce these relations. Through this article, comfort and clothing practices assist in
this complication because both speak to these processes of racialisation.

When thinking of the clothing analytically, much has been said about how objects can assist in
orientating the body towards the comfort expected within a home space (Blunt and Dowling 2006;
Miller 2008; Noble 2005; Tolia-Kelly 2004; Wise 2000). Within this, little is done to consider how clothing
provides insight into this process of getting comfortable. In focusing on clothing practices, there is a
connection made to the body as a space illustrating the language of identity (Longhurst 1995; Simonsen
2000). However I do not focus on the role of the body and comportment more generally, but use this
to push for an understanding of how clothing practices illustrate a (partially) visible reading of the
negotiation of comfort through oft-repeated performances.

Clothing practices are of particular interest because of the social meanings they acquire when read
as part of learned bodily techniques in different spaces (Craik 1994; Goffman 1959; Lewis 2009).

Despite the temporality of our changing clothes and what this says about socially coded body manage-
ment techniques, research on Muslim women (and Muslim women’s clothing) is overwhelmingly focused
on the headscarf (e.g. Bilge 2010; Dwyer 2008; Franks 2000; Gökarıksel 2009; Secor 2002; Werbner 2007).
This fixes Muslim women as reducible to specific garments (denoted as explicitly ‘Muslim’) rather than
understanding the fluidity of our identities, changing in relation to the different audiences we engage
with. Clothing practices are used precisely because of what they signify about ‘socially sanctioned’
body management techniques. These changing clothing practices explore how the body affects and
is affected through these relationships with the social processes that construct one’s surroundings.

This understanding of clothing practices as part of learned bodily techniques is situated alongside
the diversity of performances of religious identification. Several academics (e.g. Berns McGown 1999;
McMichael 2002; Tuan 1977; Valentine, Sporton, and Nielsen 2009) reflect upon how religious identifi-
cation can be used as an ‘anchor’ when travelling to new nations, building on wider arguments around
the trans-national Muslim Ummah (community) and the ability for religious identification to move (and
alter) with people.

This works within the assumption that Muslims engaging in religious performances are migrants
to the West rather than part of the make-up of the West, an assumption that is partially critiqued by
work on the popularity of new forms of religious identification (e.g. Mushaben 2008). Even within this,
practices that are seen as too different (i.e. too strange) are still expelled as migrating into the West,
holding up the Islam vs. the West binary that pervades many academic and social imaginations (Massad
2015; Werbner 2000).

This language of the stranger enables us to situate the valuing of these differences not on the
bodies of Black Muslim women, but as marking bodies as strange; melanin and clothing practices are
positioned as deviant rather than being inherently so (Lorde [1980] 1996; Saldanha 2006; Tarlo 2010).
Comfort moves this thinking forward by focusing on how we construct spaces to sink into. There is not
a homogeneous understanding of our bodies as ‘Other’ or ‘out of place’: through different constructions
of home, I illustrate the fluidity inherent in the presentation of our bodies across different spaces. Instead
of describing what Black Muslim women in Britain happen to do or wear to illustrate this fluidity, I focus on how getting comfortable speaks to the constitution of processes of racialization, gender, religious and national identification.

In bringing this scholarship together, I speak to Muslim geographies as well as the processes which produce these encounters more generally. By working through comfort, I centre affective relations across bodies that are marked as deviant from the unmarked norm. Through the context of Muslim geographies, this article uses comfort, home and clothing practices to further a language for how the presentation of bodies produces (and is produced by) these relationships across different spaces.

**Getting home: shifting clothing practices**

It's like, a transition. I get home, I take this off [the abaya] straight away, I take my hijab [headscarf] off, I take this like shirt off and then I wear what's underneath, and then, I take my shoes off and then my socks. So I'm just like wearing what's underneath. And then I get upstairs, and then I take my hair out of the bauble and then I'm like, I throw my bags down, and then I eat something, I'm still wearing this, and then I go upstairs and then I put my house clothes on. (Sahra, 19, lives with mother and 3 sisters)

For Sahra, the goal is to get ‘comfy’; clothes worn outside of this experience of home are removed as she gets closer to this ideal, indicating how different parts of the house become associated with different stages of dress. The abaya and headscarf, a part of Sahra’s identity whilst moving through the street or at university are removed. Sahra’s relaying of her dressing for home illustrates the need to move away from one-dimensional understandings of people racialized through public performances of religious identification (i.e. the headscarf and abaya).

This is possible through the multi-dimensional hijab as outlined by Mernissi (1991). Mernissi separates the meaning of hijab as a process of territorialisation from that of the cloth denoted by terms like headscarf or veil. The ability of hijab to demarcate a boundary between one’s self and relevant audiences is of particular interest: in public, these garments establish both a boundary around the body and signify the body as visibly Muslim. Her visibility as Muslim is produced in relation to the other bodies that are neutralised (and afforded the possibilities within public comfort). As Sahra re-orientates her presentation of self towards being at home, the boundary around her body shifts and is represented through the home rather than the abaya and headscarf.

When at home, there is a sinking into her home space, but the boundaries around her body do not completely dissipate. The boundary around the house structure enables her to remove layers that are part of negotiating public space, and she wears ‘house clothes’ instead. Thus the boundaries around one’s body may not inhibit our ability to ‘sink into’ the spaces we’re negotiating. Rather, these boundaries might assist us in manoeuvring through these spaces, even as they also signify our bodies as out of place. The different boundaries around the body illustrate how comfort (through the use of boundaries) and discomfort (through one’s visibility as a source of society’s discomfort) can be entwined within the spaces that we are encountering.

Focusing on the shifting nature of this boundary enables us to think about how presentations alter through different spaces, and how some audiences (and spaces) elicit a closer sense of comfort than others. Aaliyah reflects on wearing plainer scarves once entering university spaces compared to her ‘freer’ days as a younger woman surrounded by other Muslims:

Cos other people are looking at me and I feel like… they don’t say it to me, but there’s like a code of conduct or a code of like appearance. There’s like an unwritten rule in certain situations? Especially at the university. If you walk in looking like, like you actually have a personality on your head [she laughs] so to speak… I don’t know, I just feel like it would look weird. If more people did it, like when I was in school everybody did it, everybody had different headscarves and stuff. If more people did that here, I would do it. But I feel like I’m already the centre of attention for just wearing the headscarf anyways, I don’t need even more attention on me. (Aaliyah, 25, lives with parents)

Franklin (2001, 144) notes how Black women have to navigate ‘concerns about not looking foolish under the white gaze’ when going to work. Aaliyah recognises her clothing practices as connected to the hypervisibility of her dressed body within her place of work. This awareness leads to not wanting
to look ‘weird’ or feel ‘uncomfortable’ in front of this controlled gaze. This returns to wider discussions on how Othered bodies need to ‘know’ themselves (in part) through this process of Othering (Fanon [1952] 2008). Aaliyah is aware of being ‘visibly Muslim’ and negotiates this through a performance that (she thinks) will attract less attention.

This is done through reflecting on different performances where she was not hypervisible as a Muslim body, where it was possible to be comfortable while having ‘a personality on your head.’ As this was not possible at university, plainer scarves could assist in mediating the attention that she feels she receives as a strange body. Through Aaliyah’s positioning as out of place, comfort is negotiated by her attempt to use boundaries around her body (the plainer scarves) which limit her hypervisibility. Comfort speaks to how the boundaries around the body shift as we move and present our bodies in relation to different audiences and objects. Our performance of religious identification is thus dynamic and the next section addresses how to understand the fluidity embedded in processes of identification through clothing practices.

Clothing and processes of identification

When at home some of the Black Muslim women spoke of wearing shiids, described as a ‘long shapeless cotton dress’ (see Figure 2). This was learned through seeing older Somali women wearing the same clothes at home. These clothes were typically brought over from Somalia and divided amongst the women in the household.

There is a performance of a gendered identification around age and being ‘grown up’ enough to wear shiids as home clothes – women reflected on how these clothing practices were adopted as they got older to reflect their positioning amongst other Somali women. Thus, the conceptualization of ‘comfy’ clothes is in and of itself fluid, altering as new performances are engaged within (and beyond) the home. This extends to our understandings of being comfortable: as we encounter different bodies, objects and spaces, all of which produce varying experiences of how our bodies could become known, our understanding of being ‘at ease’ in the presentation of our bodies is also reconfigured.

With the example of the shiid, it is clear that clothing practices are used to present multi-layered national identities whilst constructing home. These national performances within (and beyond) the boundary of home speak to how these identifications may assist or limit the sensation of one’s body sinking into spaces. As these clothes travel from other (international) homes, they take on new meanings when worn by women in new homes (Tolia-Kelly 2004).

This connects to work by McMichael (2002) and others on the fluidity of religious identification when at home as we practice symbolically religious acts across different spaces. This re-valuing of clothing as we move into new homes is also illustrated by Hind when she goes to the mosque on Eid day. Hind does not usually wear abayas or a headscarf except when going to the mosque during Eid celebrations with her mother and sister in London:

> I think there is some sort of a self-consciousness and there’s also this whole kind of like... things go through your head you’re just like, oh what people think about Saudi Arabia, what people think about Muslims, what people think about bla bla bla, but actually it’s happened a few times where people, loads of the general public are like ‘Mubarak’ [religious greeting] to us and such and such which is kinda nice. […] once you get to Baker Street and everyone’s going to the mosque there, it’s... it’s incredible. […] like as you’re walking there’s just this entire array of just like colour and culture and all this sort of stuff and it’s just, it’s really nice. And it’s like for that day like everyone, everyone’s fully fully together. (Hind, 26, lives alone)

Hind is surprised when people (part of this unmarked ‘general public’) express a congratulatory greeting because learned behaviour suggests that marking her body as visibly Muslim is a deviance from the ‘general public’ norm, sustaining a sense of discomfort. This discomfort with being visible is eventually negated when reaching a place where she feels her clothing no longer marks her as the difference worth observing, enabling her to feel a part of the place by noting how ‘everyone’s fully fully together.’ When at the mosque there is not a recreation of a distant home, but a note on how clothing practices observed within these new spaces create a sense of belonging amongst a multi-cultural audience.
This returns to Aaliyah’s negotiation around her visibility as a Muslim body by wearing garments that (she felt) would attract less attention. For Hind, this hypervisibility is not a cause for concern when moving into the trans-national space of Baker Street. One’s religious identification is therefore negotiated in relation to different audiences. Baker Street is presented as providing a sense of comfort relating to this wider Muslim Ummah (beyond a national community). Comfort is also understood through the unease (or, in Hind’s words, ‘self-consciousness’) when wearing these different colours and garments in places that are constructed as outside of this experience of ‘Baker Street.’

Although Lewis (2009, 72) touched upon the fluidity of Muslim women’s identity, this article develops a more nuanced understanding of how the same clothes can elicit shifting notions of comfort. In short, we process experiences of being in and out of place through encountering different bodies and objects. Even when participants felt their visibility, there were tactics used to negotiate this as will be discussed in the next section.

**Wiggling to get comfortable**

When getting comfortable in home clothes, there is a careful consideration of the audiences negotiated. When at home with her mother and sisters, Asiya comments that there are clothes that are too see-through and ‘nobody needs to be seeing that.’ This reflects an understanding of hijab as a form of territorialisation, shifting in accordance with this construction of home and how different members of the household (and places within the house) are positioned in relation to the body as territory. Although the abaya is used to represent this boundary when in public spaces for both Asiya and Sahra, other clothing practices are used to shift an understanding of this boundary when at home. Comfort does not need to mean the absence of boundaries around the body to enable this sinking feeling into one’s surroundings. Comfort can be the negotiation of these boundaries in order to establish a sense of self beyond this representation as deviant. Boundaries can thus enable a sense of comfort in relation to the audiences that are being engaged with.

It is this consideration of different audiences that Sahra recounts through her experience at a sleepover with her ‘Pakistani’ friends:

*What did you wear to the pyjama party actually?*

I didn’t even wear my pyjamas [she laughs]

*Was it your home clothes then?*

No, I just wore a t-shirt. To be fair I kept this [the abaya] on for as long as I could, like as long as. And then I wore some sweatpants and like, like a flowy t-shirt. And they were like ‘that’s not pyjamas’ and I was like, if I wear my home clothes, it’s basically like a shiid […] Cos like I don’t really, like when I’m around other people I never get fully comfortable, cos I don’t know. It takes a while for me to relax. (Sahra, 19, lives with mother and 3 sisters)

Comfort speaks to an ideal within the home that for some (like Sahra) should not (or cannot) be facilitated elsewhere. The shiid’s representation as a Somali garment also reflects how clothing practices associated with forms of banal nationalism might lead to a concern with it being (mis)recognized as ‘inappropriate’ or ‘strange’ for spaces outside of particular homes.

This reflects the national boundaries set up to govern clothing practices in different spaces; the wearing of national garments that do not conform with expected practices on the street (in Hind’s example), or as pyjamas (in Sahra’s example) can cause a sense of dislocation. Hind & Babs reflected on the wearing of ‘national’ Sudanese garments outside of Sudan or Sudanese gatherings and how ‘impractical’ they were for public spaces. Their ‘impracticality’ connects with the manner in which the clothed body’s presentation becomes known as strange/out of place within these everyday public spaces (for both Hind and Babs).

The representation of these clothes as positioning our visible bodies within certain (limiting) discourses is also pushed against by Black Muslim women. Such experiences can be thought of in relation to Ahmed’s conceptualisation of ‘wiggling’ to create space for one’s self.
I have been thinking of social categories as rooms, as giving residence to bodies. Some social categories might be experienced as roomier than others. When I think of roominess, I think of wiggle room. Often, it is a most affectionate thought. I think of shoes that in being roomy, allow my toes to wiggle about. I think of less roomy shoes, and I think of my toes with sadness and sympathy: they would be cramped, less able to wiggle. Less wiggle room: less freedom to be; less being to free. (Ahmed 2014b)

Ahmed draws from Young's (1980) work on how behaving ‘like a girl’ is learned through practised techniques of how to inhabit one’s body. Wiggling can be required in order to make this categorisation of gender bigger, enabling us to have the space to perform our identities in ways that negotiate around a sense of dislocation (i.e. the sense of ‘less freedom to be’).

Home clothing can be understood as a process of wiggling that allows bodies to occupy room in ways that are not facilitated in public spaces. When Sahra decides against wearing shiids to a sleepover with friends that are ‘like white people,’ there is a negotiation of the imagined audience that is engaged with and the inability to wiggle to get comfortable in certain clothing there. Wiggling to create room does not mean that one can get comfortable in all spaces, but could involve recognising that comfort is tied to the boundaries we feel around us. In other words, comfort is a relational term to the bodies and places we interact with, dependent on how we experience ‘less freedom to be.’

It is this negotiation of different clothing practices in order to ‘be’ that is revisited with different women. When wearing an abaya to a mosque, Khadijah tried wearing her pyjamas underneath, and noted the discomfort felt:

I shouldn’t admit to this on tape, but last Saturday, I was running late? And I remember I was brushing my teeth, getting ready, and I was rushing around trying to find some like, jeans to wear. And I was like, ‘why bother? When you come back you’re gonna change into these pyjamas anyways, keep em on!’ And I went, but it was so awful cos I was so conscious that I was wearing my pyjamas outside

[…] I felt comfortable. But then I felt uncomfortable cos I thought what if people know. People must know, people might think, oh dear, this was not a smart idea (Khadijah, 24, lives with parents and 3 sisters).

Khadijah’s discomfort is expressed in relation to the imagined gazes that regulate accepted clothing practices. This reflects work by Appleford (2015, 15) where participants associated wearing pyjamas outside of the home with working-class performances that ‘fail to adhere to standards of respectability.’ Although this resonates with the discomfort Khadijah processes, it is interesting to focus on the role of public audiences in this narrative. Khadijah notes that it is the possibility of others seeing beyond this boundary that causes discomfort. Thus the boundary around the abaya is not felt to be as stable for the wearig of her pyjamas compared to the boundary that is built around her construction of home.

This illustrates the fluidity of comfort within different spaces that we engage with – as we move, the same clothes could cause both a sense of comfort and discomfort depending on the audiences that are engaged with. The temporality of clothing practices and ability to wiggle to create room in certain spaces over others rejects a static definition of those who are positioned as visibly Muslim within certain public spaces. Our ‘visibility’ is conditional on this positioning as deviant within some but (importantly) not all spaces.

**Conclusion: comfort and wiggle room**

This article has reflected on the process of getting comfortable at home to further a nuanced understanding of how bodies represented as strange develop comfort in relation to the presentations of our bodies. Comfort, as a ‘sinking feeling,’ is negotiated through the space in which you are ‘sinking’ into as well as the boundaries around one’s body which may assist or limit this potential to fit into one’s surroundings. These boundaries are shifting, mediated through the audiences, objects and places we negotiate. In using these boundaries around the body, Black Muslim women wiggle across the different spaces within which our bodies have (more or less) freedom to be. Thus I expand an understanding of comfort to pay attention to the boundaries around the body and how this helps to navigate discomfort and produce a sense of comfort.
Theorising comfort provides a needed departure from focusing on home as the site of comfort-making, teasing out the differences between notions of home and comfort. Once these differences are uncovered, it is possible to explore the different moments across public and private spaces that produce comfort/discomfort. Comfort enables a more complex understanding of these clothing practices that are both a boundary around the body and a part of our perception of our body’s visibility in relation to particular audiences or spaces. Through understanding this negotiation of comfort, one can think of the possibilities in moving away from a static positioning as ‘deviant’ or strange and towards a critical understanding of how different spaces and clothing practices are utilized in the construction of identities. It opens up understandings of how the body is negotiated when attempting to find places within which we belong.

Within this, the abaya and headscarf have been used to understand how the hypervisualization of Muslim women engaging with these (and other visibly Muslim) practices should be complicated. These clothing practices shift and open up the possibility of wiggling to get ‘comfy’ with audiences where certain performances (and boundaries around one’s body) are not positioned as deviant. Understanding this fluidity pushes for a more nuanced exploration of the different processes that shape the lives of Black Muslim women.

Importantly, it does this by stretching current understandings of affective encounters across bodies, objects and spaces. When comfort is understood as a process, the relations that effect its potential (and our potential to fit in) can be unpacked. In doing this, the processes of racialisation, gendering and clothing practices that position us across different spaces are complicated in relation to our own embodied experience of being. This reading of how racialized persons experience home (and the spaces beyond it) builds on work within emotional geographies to illustrate a multi-faceted understanding of comfort.

Notes

1. Thien (2005) provides a succinct critique of why ‘Thriftian’ (2004) or McCormack (2003) inspired affective geographies re-inscribe this public/private distinction when separating affect from feminised ‘nice and cuddly’ emotions.
2. This is illustrated in part through writing myself into this grouping, a point to be unpicked within the Methodology section.
3. This echoes Gorman-Murray’s (2006) description of ‘unhomely homes’ where homes were re-configured to suit the needs of gay men, causing a deviation from heteronormative constructions of home.
4. For a discussion of the differences between emotional and affective geographies within contemporary literature, see Pile (2010).

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the participants who worked with me on this project, to my family for helping me understand the concept of comfort within the home, and to Richard Phillips and Eric Olund for commenting on earlier drafts of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number1363807].

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