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No love found: how female students of colour negotiate and repurpose university spaces

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences on campus of five female undergraduate students of colour. Drawing on a critical race theory perspective and inspired by CRiT walking, walking interviews were conducted to give voice to the students' experiences of marginalisation, both metaphorical and physical. The findings reveal how whiteness impacts on participants' negotiation of university spaces; how the 'white gaze' influences their geographies; and how their experiences lead them to occupy counter-spaces within the university. Further, we found that participants' aspirations of postgraduate education were tainted by these negative experiences at the undergraduate level, leading them to reject altogether or begrudgingly continue their education. The study proposes theoretically framed walking interviews as a productive methodology in future critical studies of race in education and highlights the urgent need to address the marginalisation of female students of colour on campus as one means of addressing postgraduate recruitment imbalances.

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Introduction

In a 2017 keynote address to the annual Association for the Study of Higher Education conference, Mark Lamont Hill, a scholar of colour, rhetorically asked of predominantly white institutions: 'Do you love me?' (Hill 2017). His question, provoked by persistent race inequalities in university access, achievement, and teaching staff representation in the US (Hughes and Giles 2010; Warikoo 2018), is timely, urgent, and equally pertinent in other geographical contexts. England is a case in point. Students of colour are well-represented at the undergraduate level, accounting for 23% of the HE student population (Equality Challenge Unit 2018, 113). However, their presence is much stronger in 'lower status' universities (McCaig 2018a, 2018b), and strong disparities between students of colour and white students in attainment, engagement, and retention persist (Madriaga 2020). These differential outcomes are perhaps most clearly evidenced by the academic achievement gap – the disparity in the awarding of an undergraduate 'good degree' classification (a 1st or 2.1 degree) between students of colour and white students – which according to the Equality Challenge Unit (2018, 114) stood at 15% in favour of the latter.

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Less is known about how students of colour fare at postgraduate levels. Whether the achievement gap persists is uncertain, although Richardson (2015) and Woolf, Potts, and McManus (2011) hint that this may be the case. Some disparities have been shown in terms of retention, although again, the literature is limited (Wakeling and Kyriacou 2010). A joint report published by Universities UK and National Union of Students (2019, 46) mentioned that UK-domiciled students of colour make-up only 17% of all postgraduate research students. Furthermore, evidence in 2017/18 shown that only 3% of doctoral students were of Black (African-Caribbean) heritage (Williams et al. 2019, 3). This is a worrying statistic given that a postgraduate degree is increasingly required in crowded job markets; lower numbers of students of colour obtaining higher degrees clearly places them at a disadvantage (Universities UK and National Union of Students 2019; Wakeling 2009). And as for those who do gain post-graduate qualifications, unemployment is triple the rate of their white counterparts (Trade Union Congress 2016). This begs a question as to how students of colour perceive themselves belonging within the English academy and their life chances beyond it. Not much is known as to how students of colour carve out space and niches while attending university, or even their perceptions of the academy as a place of employment, particularly from the perspective of female students of colour.

Graduate Muslim women have the highest rates of economic inactivity out of all female alumni (Stevenson et al. 2017). Few women of colour gain employment in the upper echelons of academia (Arday and Mirza 2018; Bhopal 2016; Mirza 2009; Rollock 2019; Stevenson 2018) and thus it is unlikely that female students of colour will experience female faculty of colour teaching them. This neglect of women of colours' experiences speaks to Mirza's (2006, 2009) seminal work exploring how gendered inequalities are still largely seen as a white woman's issue. Equally, racialised disparities tend to be discussed in terms of male outcomes. As a result, Black women and other women of colour become in(visible) in the academy (Mirza 2009, 123). Bhopal (2016) furthers this analysis by illuminating how the embodied intersectionality of women of colour results in a 'double penalty' against them. Given this stark reality of outcomes and experiences in English HE, students of colour, particularly female students of colour, might well ask: 'Do you love me?'

It is (of course) beyond the scope of this paper to answer that question fully. Instead, we focus on the aspect of love that invokes a sense of belonging, familiarity, and ease with one's immediate surroundings. For example, Rollock (2019) and Stockfelt's (2018) exploration of black female professors' career journeys showed that a sense of belonging in the UK academy was, for them, sorely lacking. Reflecting on such experiences, we sought to probe how female undergraduate students of colour experience and navigate university spaces, and how this may influence their perspectives on and aspirations for further graduate study. Our study is framed by a critical race theory (CRT) approach, which views English higher education as an exclusionary space, and not race neutral. We show that in the racialised higher education sector, female students of colour have to carve out counter spaces for survival.

To reveal these counter spaces, a highly contextualised and inclusive methodology was called for, and in particular, one that would illuminate the lived experiences of female students of colour on campus, enable these students to engage in authentic dialogues and to narrate their own stories. It was therefore decided, inspired by 'CRiT walk' (Hughes and Giles 2010), that Amira, a female student of colour [British African], would accompany other female students of colour around campus. Given the richness of our findings, we

argue that the additional contribution of the study lies in its exemplification of the application of walking interviews, in general, as a qualitative method that provides meaningful insights into lived experiences (Evans and Jones 2011).

Connecting race and space: a background to CRT and CRIT walking

Smith (2012) argued that how a problem is framed and defined determines how it can best be solved. Unfortunately, the problem of the race achievement gap, particularly in English HE, has been framed by a view that assumes a value-neutral, meritocratic, and colour-blind institution (Crozier 2018; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). This perspective not only ignores history, such as the legacy of colonialism and eugenics upon English education (see Chitty 2009; Tomlinson 2019), but also discounts persistent structural racism and the pervasiveness of white supremacy (Madriaga and McCaig 2019; Madriaga 2020). The result is that educational policies which attempt to remedy 'gaps' offer a false narrative of individual ability as a major factor affecting attainment (Gillborn 2015). This understanding pathologizes, explaining away entire student groups' underachievement as a question of individual merit rather than structural, societal factors such as institutional racism (Ball 2017; Knowles and Lander 2012).

In comprehending this pathology of underachievement, and why students of colour are hindered in their spatial mobilities of English HE, we draw on CRT as a lens to magnify dimensions of race and racism. Rooted in US legal scholarship (Bell 1992; Crenshaw 1991; Matsuda 1987), CRT traversed disciplinary boundaries, and entered education via Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) seminal paper. Five tenets of CRT pertinent to education research were subsequently laid out by Solórzano and Yosso (2002, 25–27):

- The inter-centricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination – while race and racism are foregrounded, they must be viewed at their intersection with other forms of subordination, such as class and gender;
- The challenge to dominant ideology – white supremacy is to be challenged, and notions of 'neutral' research or 'objective' researchers rejected. Deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of colour is exposed;
- The commitment to social justice – this offers a transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression, acknowledging that educational spaces are contradictory in that their potential to marginalise coexists with their potential to transform;
- The centrality of experiential knowledge – this exposes deficit-informed research and methods that silence and distort the experiences of people of colour and instead focuses on their racialised, gendered, and classed experiences as sources of strength;
- The transdisciplinary perspective – this challenges ahistoricism and the uni-disciplinary focus of most analyses and insists on analysing race and racism by placing them in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Building on this tradition, the likes of Doharty (2019a, 2019b), Gillborn (2005, 2008, 2015), Joseph-Salisbury (2019), Rollock (2012), and Sian (2019) have advanced CRT work within the English context. It is also important to highlight a point made by Annamma, Jackson, and Morrison (2017, 152), that the intellectual lineage of CRT stretches back to US scholars and activists in the 1900s such as Ida B. Wells and W. E. B. Du Bois who both

centred race in analyses of injustice and listening to the historically oppressed. Crucially, both Wells and Du Bois wrote and talked as scholar-activists. They did not just talk; they walked the talk.

This ‘walking-the-talk’ in CRT has been referred to as ‘CRiT walking’. Hughes and Giles (2010, 45) conceived CRiT walking as an act of interpreting and testing experiences, assumptions, observations, and spaces of daily interactions through the process of critical dialogue, critical pedagogy, creative narrative expression, and the act of resistance to hegemony. Although explicit about their metaphorical use of CRiT walking (i.e. not physically walking), Hughes and Giles (2010, 42) did discuss walking with students around the ‘campus’ to sense-check whiteness:

... They walk and talk about examples of the complexities and perceptions of race within their environment, how some things are obvious and other things are not. This process seeks to push students out of their comfort zones and challenge the norms of colour-blind assumptions or the passive acceptance of blatant systemic racism.

While CRiT walking makes pedagogical sense as advocated by Hughes and Giles (2010), it also offers a way to research whiteness, a method, under the banner of CRT (Solórzano and Yosso 2002); marking whiteness, making the invisible *visible*, is an act against hegemony, a step towards transformation and social justice. However, this work, this resistance against the power of the white gaze (Du Bois 1903; Fanon 1986) is burdensome, draining people of colour to illness and fatigue in their battle to ensure their existence (Smith et al. 2011). In efforts to avoid the white gaze, students of colour may conjure their own counter-spaces ‘on campus’ (Carter 2007). These counter-spaces, as described by Carter (2007, 543), can be formal and informal social and academic spaces that buffer experiences with racism and other forms of discrimination in educational institutions. These counter-spaces are group-affirming spaces where students of colour feel safe and secure. These spaces are not too dissimilar from Moten and Harney’s (2004) undercommons or even La Paperson’s (2017) vision of the ‘third university’, where those who are marginalised by the academy’s colonialism and racism, as a collective, find niches of space from within to be their authentic selves. In the following section, we will flesh out how we combined the idea of CRiT walking with walking interviews to explore these counter spaces with our participants and gather the data for the study.

Method

The first author, Amira, accompanied the participants on foot around the campus of a large, modern university in the north of England. The former polytechnic was given university status under the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. The architecture can be seen as the antithesis of the traditional British ‘red-brick’ or gothic building. The buildings are high-rise, centrally situated and facilities are modern. The university has a growing reputation for research, but strong emphasis remains on the learning and experience of students. A high proportion of the students come from the local area, with high numbers of students from so-called ‘under-represented groups’. While not prestigious, the university is ambitious and has gained ground in league tables in recent years

Participants were asked to guide the walking interview by selecting a route through the university campus which encompassed their most and least preferred spaces. It is on these

walks that whiteness and the varying intensities of the white gaze within the ‘exclusive “gated communities” of the academe’ (Hughes and Giles 2010, 48), are marked-out and made visible by the respondents. Given the layout of the campus, each walking interview entailed passing various buildings, through various alleyways, allowing the route to spark stories and anecdotes from respondents which counter, as well as avoid, the white gaze of other students and university staff. These walking interviews lasted between forty-five to sixty minutes.

Walking interviews were selected as our aim was to enable the participants to act as ‘navigational guide of the real [...] space within which he or she lives.’ The benefits of walking interviews (also referred to as go-along interviews) have been recognised in recent years in research where ‘understanding relies heavily on knowing how participants perceive their environment’ (ibid) as is the case here. The method has also been used in disciplines such as health studies and applied linguistics (Barton and McCulloch 2018). Despite the popularity of the method, to our knowledge, this study constitutes the first to apply walking interviews in studies of students of colour.

Further, Evans and Jones (2011) argue the benefit of walking interviews derives from the insights they provide into participant experiences and relationships, which may not emerge from more static, conventional interviewing techniques. This is especially pertinent in studies with marginalised groups such as students of colour whose views are often homogenised (Madriaga 2020). In line with the study’s focus on female students of colour and their perceptions of postgraduate study, the walking interviews provided an opportunity for the interviewer to immerse herself literally and figuratively into participants’ racialised realities at university. Questions posed during the walking interviews were a combination of pre-determined topics framed by de-constructing the research aims and a set of open-ended questions intended to elicit an understanding of the participants’ experience of the chosen routes. Although all five participant routes around the university campus varied, for research purposes they all remained confined to campus parameters.

The five participants of this study were final-year undergraduate students in the social sciences and at the time of writing, between the ages of 21 and 24. All self-identified as women of colour and were recruited through snowball sampling (Creswell 2014). Their self-described ethnic backgrounds are as follows (pseudonyms are used):

- Nadia – British Pakistani
- Dani – British African
- Hirrah – British Yemeni
- Safa – British African
- Audrey – British mixed race (Caribbean and Irish)

The study was carried out according to British Educational Research Association (2018) ethical guidelines and the research design was subject to the university’s rigorous ethical approval procedures. Fully informed written consent was obtained from participants. Further, the principles of ‘ethics in practice’ were observed (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). In other words, ethics were not understood purely in procedural terms; throughout the interviews, Amira was attentive and sensitive to the participants’ well-being. This was necessary given the nature of the potentially traumatic experiences they were being invited to recount.

As a female student of colour, Amira (like the participants of this study) has navigated the reality of being a minoritised student at university and has existed in spaces where her identity was either weaponised or demonised without her consent. Her positionality and its parallels with the five female students of colour endow her with a somewhat emic insight into the lived experiences of this student group (Morris et al. 1999). Issues of insider and outsider perspectives carry inherent strengths and biases, and we recognise that shared positioning can influence participant responses (Berger 2015). As female students of colour, the participants perhaps did not view Amira as the researcher-face of the institution, but rather as a sister-in-arms who has walked along the same paths as them and survived. At the same time, we of course acknowledge that each of these participants is an individual and in no way wish to present women of colour as a homogeneous group.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed by Amira. The transcripts were sent to participants for checking and approval. A six-phase thematic analysis (Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield 2015, 230) was conducted to uncover key themes in the data. Amira and Lisa began by coding a small sample of the data independently. Once completed, the data was discussed, and preliminary codes established. Amira then coded the remaining data, adjusting codes and refining themes in the iterative process inherent in qualitative research. Once the key themes were collated, a final step was to return to the data to verify interpretations.

Findings and discussion

In this section, we show how the undergraduate experiences of navigating the university relate to the participants' aspirations for postgraduate study: the findings suggest that spaces students carve out for themselves on campus are not a counter space of transformation, but rather survival spaces. In light of this exclusionary experience, most desire to extricate themselves from the university environment as soon as possible or plan to continue begrudgingly due to career demands. In the following, we present the key themes and evidence that lead to these claims.

Disassociation and detachment

The physicality of the walking interviews revealed both participants' dissociation with the university, and how they regulate interactions with university spaces. These findings are particularly germane given that positive campus interactions are a marker of student engagement (Fincher and Shaw 2011). While during the interviews, participants conveyed their commitment to their current academic studies, they reported minimal interaction with university spaces beyond this capacity. Indeed, three participants voiced a clear detachment from the institution:

I walk through campus very aware of who I am at all times [...] this isn't where I feel most comfortable, there's no sense of attachment. (Nadia)

I wouldn't say I feel connected to [name of institution], this is just the uni I go to if that makes sense. The place doesn't mean that much to me. (Dani)

...not attached to the place [...] I come for my friends. (Hirrah)

Safa and Audrey (see below) even go as far as avoiding the physical university building, adopting transactional approaches to university spaces. In line with observations consistent with the work of Carter (2007), these students display isolationist behaviours as a response to institutional marginalisation:

I tried as hard as possible to limit my time on campus this last year, it's just draining. I would rather go study in a coffee shop than sit in the library (Safa).

Unless I need to be at university, I'm not here. I do my work at home. I have no other reason to be there (Audrey).

Other students formed non-traditional connections with university spaces (see Stevenson 2018). Hirrah took Amira to 'Level 1', a plain, medium-sized computer room in a quieter-than-most teaching building. She explained that her interaction with university largely entails finding spaces such as this, but large enough to accommodate her friendship group: 'We [referencing friends] mostly do our work on level 1, basically, anywhere that's comfortable and can seat us all, that's the only criteria.'

Nadia's choice of spaces was more influenced by her feelings of hypervisibility as a South Asian woman on campus. She felt compelled to seek out 'low-key' spaces where she does not feel 'exposed or vulnerable [...]'. For this student, navigating the university was guided by the search for security, a safe place.

These accounts uncover both feelings of disassociation from the institution and participants' regulation of their interactions with the university. These experiences were shaped by a sense of marginalisation within the institution, such as Nadia's hunt for a quiet place, walking across the university 'very aware of who I am at all times', searching for secluded spaces on campus where she doesn't 'stick out as much.' These sentiments of marginalisation can be understood as experiences of exclusion, which prompt participants to search for more autonomous, non-traditional ways of navigating university (Biddulph 2011; Evans 2008).

Reclaiming spaces

In the previous section, we proposed that students either disassociate from the university or find alternative ways of navigating university spaces. In this section, we show how students exercise their agency (Valentine 2000), countering the heat of the white gaze by reclaiming spaces within the campus to just *be* themselves (Carter 2007; Hughes and Giles 2010). We show how our participants utilised their agency to negotiate and navigate against the whiteness within the university.

During the walking interviews, Safa and Audrey revealed how they exercise their agency to navigate away from more traditionally student-oriented spaces and towards their own preferred spaces. For example, Safa feels that the student union – a large, modern building dominated by students rather than staff, complete with bar, café and sound stage, a space designed for students to meet, socialise and be entertained – is not for people like her. Instead, she took Amira to the 'top floor'. The top floor is situated in a large teaching building and is accessed by a modern, but quite grand staircase. The space is mostly for non-teaching staff to administrate, and faculty leadership is situated there. Safa commented, 'I don't ever hangout at the students' union, I feel like it's not catered towards me or people like me. To

be honest, the union is just not accommodating to the entire student body.' Interestingly, her choice of space is subversive, as she acknowledges that students are not supposed to be there:

This is my preferred spot to sit in when I need to be at uni... students aren't really meant to work on the top floor, but I normally get away with it.

Audrey also avoids popular student hangouts such as breakout areas, distancing herself from her cohort and claiming isolated and peripheral spaces instead, or preferring to just walk around. On the walk, she led Amira to the central teaching building, up high, to a small corner that overlooked the busy goings on below. Audrey makes that space her own, even going as far as to give the space a private name – the balcony:

[...] here's a place I sit between sessions sometimes, its super chill and private right – you can look down see what's going on but you're not right in the middle of it all. Me and my friends call it the balcony.

These findings evoke how students mobilize their (albeit limited) autonomy in university spaces. Audrey would in fact rather be transient than settle in a setting she perceives as 'overwhelming':

Whenever we have a break in-between sessions everyone from my cohort tends to come and sit in here, the breakout area [an airy space, with high ceilings and an open floor plan, with several relaxed seating areas for small groups] – it can be overwhelming sometimes, you end up seeing everyone. I'd rather walk around campus than sit in here.

Similarly, Safa articulates her preference for places where 'students aren't really meant to work,' echoing Evans (2008), who showed students gravitating towards non-traditional spaces as a display of self-determination. Thus, students exercise their agency in response to exclusionary experiences within university spaces (Biddulph 2011; Valentine 2000), at times navigating against university expectations.

Negotiating the whiteness of university space

The university is very much a racialised space, which regulates the mobility of students of colour by the pervasiveness of the white gaze. Whiteness is taken-for-granted and invisible to the extent of being normal. This is highlighted in discourses of 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' university students, in which 'traditional' students are axiomatic of being white (Pilkington 2013; Stevenson 2018). This is evident in student responses.

Audrey took Amira to some small booths situated in a short corridor with seminar rooms and offices. She talked about the importance of carving out her own territory on campus. The booths seat around 4 people and are equipped with a computer and large screen:

I sit in these booths all the time. It's the opposite of everything I don't like about the [library], it's not just for certain people...I feel like I create my own vibe here and don't have to fight for space. Nobody can interrupt me or say that it's pre-booked [...] there's no risk of getting kicked out or being made to feel so awkward that I just wanna leave [...].

This comment illustrates Audrey's desire for her own space where she cannot be 'interrupted' or 'kicked out.' Interestingly, this quote also uncovers how Audrey's feelings about the library are antithetical to her feelings about this space. From the comparison drawn, it could be argued that Audrey has mobilized her agency to move away from a space where she felt powerless into a space where she holds authority. To unpick this further, Stevenson (2018) argues that marginalised student groups are unable to negotiate the boundaries of their interactions to the same extent as normative students (referring to white middle-class individuals who traditionally have had access to university; see also Mir [2007] and Nasir and Al-Amin [2006]). Pilkington (2013) asserts that it is these traditional student groups who hold a monopoly over power in university spaces. Thus, Audrey feels the need to 'fight for space' as the library is welcoming to only 'certain people.' She is countering the whiteness of university space.

We found that our participants are pressured to either transform their identities in order to access university spaces or simply compromise by creating their own spaces (Asmar, Proude, and Inge 2004; McGregor 2004). For example, Safa and Nadia revealed a keen awareness of how their identities as women of colour impact their experiences of university places and spaces:

I'm a black girl and I'm very aware of how I stick out at uni, even a lot of the BME societies I went to have stopped. It's so hard to explain [...] you feel like people look at you because of your race and stereotype you, but equally you feel left out and ignored at the same time – It's complicated. (Safa)

As a visibly Muslim and Asian woman I feel so [expletive] uncomfortable at times [...] Like I said earlier, this is why I specifically sit in quiet areas. I'm in my last year, I don't have energy for problems. (Nadia)

For Safa, these experiences are somewhat paradoxical and difficult to process: her hyper-visibility as a black woman on campus was clearly problematic, and yet she lamented feeling 'ignored at the same time' Her reality as a black woman at university was therefore 'complicated.' Nadia echoed Safa's experiences of exclusion in that her religious and racial identities – in particular the wearing of the hijab – were integral to experiences of marginalisation on campus. Unlike Safa, Nadia conveys a sense of angry exasperation, removing herself from discomfort-inducing spaces, and rooting out 'quiet areas' to avoid 'problems.'

These findings reflect multiple studies conducted with minoritized students exploring issues of belonging, exclusion and racism in HE (e.g. Bagguley and Hussain 2016; Basford 2010; Bhopal 2016; Mirza 2006, 2009; Stevenson et al. 2017), such as Nasir and Al-Amin's (2006) study on Muslim students' isolation in which hostile campus environments were found to be a factor in students distancing themselves from the university. Nadia senses this hostility but has risen above it – she has no more 'energy for problems' as she is in her final year.

Performative roles and spaces

While Nadia adapted to different university spaces as a way of dealing with exclusion, other participants reported performing roles as a coping mechanism. For example, on the walk around campus, Dani told Amira:

I can never just be myself at uni. I have to subdue my personality. It can be too much for certain people, white people. I have to behave different, almost in a performative way [...] I know it's because I'm black, like what else could it be... but you just get over it eventually.

Dani acts 'different, almost in a performative way' due to her experiences as a black woman in HE. She feels compelled to (re)construct her identity within the university space in order to increase her sense of belonging and survive (see Mir 2007; Taylor 2010). Further, she views her blackness as the primary reason for white people's discomfort, asking 'what else could it be?' Given this, she plays the student role she considers necessary to navigate the institution. This finding is echoed in Dani's later comments:

It's these constant micro-aggressions [...] I will not risk my degree trying to speak up about my negative experiences as a black student, sadly it's just not a battle I would win so why try? You have to be smart and play the system.

Dani overlooks the micro-aggressions she faces in order to 'be smart and play the system', reconstructing her identity in order to steer through university (Taylor 2010). Dani's comments (similar to experiences outlined by Nadia), convey students' reluctance to vocalise their experiences of exclusion, as, in the words of Dani, 'it's just not a battle I would win, so why try?' It seems that our participants opt to censor their experiences and identities rather than confront their exclusion – a case of survival over transformation.

The impact of marginalisation on postgraduate study

On the whole, our findings paint a picture of marginalisation. Students avoid the campus, have little sense of belonging, seek out peripheral spaces, and perform identities that they feel minimise or subdue their racialised identities. It is perhaps not surprising then that only one participant out of five stated they would continue onto postgraduate education, with the remaining four ruling out any immediate interest. In this section, we show how some of the findings outlined in previous sections may influence our participants' decisions.

When asked about postgraduate study, Hirrah and Audrey expressed disillusionment resulting from their experiences at undergraduate level:

Shall I be honest – I don't think university is for me, the only good thing about uni is my friends, and in postgraduate that won't be the case so why should I stick around in a place that isn't for me [...]. (Hirrah)

Continuing into masters is just something I have to do for my future career [...] I wish I could just be done with university as a whole but that's not realistic. (Audrey)

Although these two participants have chosen different paths, both share feelings of weariness and disillusionment towards university life. For Audrey postgraduate study is non-negotiable in her chosen profession, but ideally, she would be 'done with university'. Likewise, Hirrah reveals that she needs 'a break for sure' and without her friends there's no reason in continuing 'in a place that isn't for me.' These sentiments resonate with earlier discussions around disassociation from university spaces and suggest how exclusionary experiences can have a damaging impact on student engagement and retention (Arday 2017).

Interestingly, Audrey revealed that she will be attending a different university for her postgraduate course, but nonetheless conveys a sense of fatigue about continuing in HE. This is perhaps a sign of broader discontent with the sector (rather than with the specific

university she attended for her undergraduate studies). Nadia also suggested unhappiness with the national HE picture, 'I just don't trust the system right now [...] when you look at disparities in terms class, race, etc. – Is it really worth it to pay ten-grand more, I don't [expletive] think so, not right now anyways.'

Nadia's reluctance to progress to HE stems from an absence of 'trust' in the system, notably highlighting race and class inequalities as a reason for not continuing beyond her first-degree (see Wakeling 2009). This lack of trust was a key theme in the Universities UK and National Union of Students (2019) report which found that students of colour connected their dissatisfaction and lower retention rates with feelings of differential treatment and a lack of belonging at university. Dani shared how her trepidation about postgraduate study is rooted in concerns about receiving the same quality of education – and exposure to racial bias – that she did at undergraduate level:

I feel like my work is judged more harshly than other people's even though mine was better and this uni doesn't do blind marking either [...] You tend to be graded worse if you have an ethnic sounding name [...] I have compared my work with my non-black or Pakistani or Muslim friends assignments and literally the difference is quite large [...] they get given the benefit of the doubt 'mark' – I don't.

In later comments, Dani was adamant that will she not pursue postgraduate study because of the lack of 'proper support' she received in her undergraduate degree. It is worth noting that her course has failed to implement blind marking, which is often regarded as a shield against unconscious bias (Bhopal 2018).

Ultimately, all the participants said that they lacked support, as many other studies have found (e.g. Connor et al. 2004; Stevenson 2012; Wakeling and Kyriacou 2010). Safa acknowledges this lack of support, but locates the issue within herself (a lack of resilience), rather than on structural inequalities:

This is the sad bit, like my [university] experience could've been so different, but I just didn't feel supported or like I could speak to someone, ever. That's why I don't rule out doing my masters fully because it could happen one day [...] I just need to build up some resilience.

Safa's quiet resolve to build up her resilience before embarking on a master's degree reveals a deep internalising of her negative experience at university, placing the burden of change on herself in that it should stem from her own attributes (Arday 2017). In contrast, Dani and Hirrah focus on structural and systemic weaknesses and a lack of representation:

They need to address issues of lecturing and adequate support, unconscious bias in marking criteria and they need to take the complaints of their students more seriously. All student tuition is equal right, money is money [...] then we should all have the same access. (Dani)

Representation is important, when you don't see anyone whose non-white you do feel left out. There's no BME academics, well only one actually [...] that's why my friends matter because I feel comfortable with them, I don't wanna be the only one [student of colour] doing a masters. (Hirrah)

In line with Richardson's (2015) study, Dani objects to universities charging students high fees when differential outcomes such as the attainment gap continue to widen, while Hirrah's comment invokes the issue of representation. Connor et al. (2004) found that the

achievement and retention of minoritized students and lack of support they received was due in part to shortages of faculty of colour as role models and mentors. In 2016, of 18,425 professors, only 110 were Black (0.6%) (Equality Challenge Unit 2017). Unless HEIs address this imbalance in diversity, students of colour are likely to continue to feel isolated within educational environments, which in turn may perpetuate low levels of engagement and progression to postgraduate study (Universities UK and National Union of Students 2019).

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we outline the contribution of this paper, which we see as twofold: first, we provide insights into the lived experience of female students of colour on campus. In the introduction we indicated that there is not much known on how students of colour carve out space within university, particularly given the lack of belonging expressed by students of colour as reported by the Universities UK and National Union of Students (2019). We suggest that the way our participants experienced their university studies, and in particular their navigation of university spaces, informed their perspectives on whether or not to continue beyond the undergraduate level. More specifically, all five either do not aspire to further study, or have begrudgingly acquiesced to continue given specific career requirements. In light of their experiences of marginalisation that were physically manifested in their navigation of university spaces we have argued that, our participants' aspirational and physical mobility in terms of university spaces have been confined. Our findings are congruent with Carter's (2007) work: the realm of our students – isolated balconies and anonymous IT rooms – constitutes a counter space, where students find refuge away from the white gaze. But these spaces are also self-affirming, purposefully selected, and in some cases repurposed.

Our second contribution lies in the method. While 'walking' or 'go along interviews' have been used in other disciplines, their affordances have not been fully exploited in the field of race and education. Our results show that by framing walking interviews with a CRiT walking ethos, we were able to give voice to the physical and aspirational realities of young female students of colour in the academy. Our results paint a picture of despondency and marginalisation that must be addressed. As highlighted earlier, the first author's identity of being a Black female postgraduate student enabled a sense of fellowship to develop during interactions with participants' (page x). In reflecting on those exchanges, the participants' echoed many of the first author's feelings around her own journey in higher education. Having already committed herself to pursuing postgraduate studies, the first author resisted depicting any influencing images of university life beyond undergraduate level during data collection. Ideally, the first author would have desired to convey a sense of hope to participants when questioned about her experiences – an encouragement that things would get better. However, this would have been insincere at best and ethically questionable at worst. The first author's reality as a postgraduate student was still one of survival and perhaps would always be.

Finally, we return to the rhetorical question posed by Marc Lamont Hill (2017) at the start of this paper, 'Do you love me?' As any neglected lover will know, if the question needs asking, the answer is self-evident. The voices of our participants ask an equally urgent question: Do you *want* me?

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