

Convivial narratives as agency: Middle-class Muslims evading racialisation in Copenhagen

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Abstract

This article presents an ethnographic analysis of how young middle-class Muslims in Copenhagen create convivial narratives of their city. The article builds on Paul Gilroy's idea of conviviality by bridging it with Saba Mahmood's concept of agency. I argue that widening the conversation on urban conviviality to include a perspective on agency allows us to expand the sociological imagination to one that combines both phenomenological and critical theory in urban analysis. In the context of Denmark, middle-class Muslims' convivial narratives can be understood as an agency to navigate Islamophobic or racist experiences, enabled by their spatial mobility and class positioning. The article concludes that Muslims' conviviality is contingent on an intersectional understanding related to racialisation, gender and socio-economic position. This approach allows an appreciation of how socially mobile Danish Muslims can construct convivial narratives to evade racism and Islamophobia in everyday life.

Keywords

agency, conviviality, Denmark, Islamophobia, Muslims, racialisation

Introduction

'You're met with prejudice when you leave the environment you're used to here', Khalid¹ explained as he described leaving his Copenhagen neighbourhood to travel around Denmark for sports tournaments. He was one of 23 young Muslims (ages 18–25) I met during my ethnographic fieldwork in Copenhagen on urban life among Danish Muslims. This quote was one of the rare instances in Khalid's narrative where he would describe experiencing any sort of direct racial tension growing up in Denmark post-9/11. Like Khalid, most of the young Muslims I met were socially mobile with prospects of a comfortable middle-class living. They would rarely speak of racism, Islamophobia or experiencing the effects of an increasingly hostile political discourse towards Muslims and other

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'non-Westerners', which is a politicised colour-blind catch-all category to describe people from primarily the Global South.² Instead, their narratives were filled with positive experiences. These narratives were focused on supportive school environments, sports clubs, religious communities, of 'ethnic' shops and restaurants that expand borders and communities, and of cultural fusion between Scandinavian design aesthetics and Muslim attire. Even the blatantly racist experiences they endured as they moved through public spaces and everyday social interactions were downplayed as unimportant to their lives in general.

These are examples of what Paul Gilroy (2004) has described as *conviviality* in urban localities. Gilroy's definition of conviviality does not detract from the importance of racism and how it is connected to societal structures and nationalist politics. Rather, he defines conviviality as the interaction, cohabitation and communal engagements across racialised, ethnic, cultural, religious and social differences in everyday life (Gilroy, 2004, p. xi). Gilroy suggests that the concept of conviviality has the potential to do that which multiculturalism has failed to do: take racism seriously while simultaneously recognise the diverse ways people in urban localities engage with each other (Gilroy, 2004, pp. 9–10). In the article "*The conviviality of the overpoliced, detained and expelled*" (2022), Luke de Noronha revisits Gilroy's concept of conviviality and critiques how scholars of urban life have adopted the term half-heartedly.

I build on de Noronha's critique by expanding the conversation of conviviality to young Muslims in Denmark. The article interrogates the idea of convivial narratives as a way to evade racialisation and challenge exclusion. My interlocutors rarely spoke of racist or Islamophobic experiences. It is however hard to overlook how the racialisation of the Muslim Other figures as an essential threat to Danish values and democracy (Rytter, 2019; Wren, 2001; Yilmaz, 2016). How is it possible to read the convivial approach young Muslims had to their Copenhagen neighbourhoods, describing it as their 'city' in relation to explicitly racialised spatial policies and political rhetoric that the Danish nation state has enforced in the past two decades, if not longer?

Based on an ethnographic analysis of young Muslim Copenhageners, this article explores how these youth challenge the racialisation of spaces within Copenhagen, thereby resisting the racial formation of Danish society itself (for a discussion on Denmark as a post-racial state, see Hassani, 2023). Their convivial narratives should not be read merely as examples of cultural diversity in urban spaces. Rather, their narratives depict ways of navigating political rhetoric that see Muslims as a threat to the social cohesion of the city, not to mention the nation (see for example Regeringen, 2018). In this sense, convivial narratives of urban life among socially mobile Muslims can be read as a tactic to navigate powerful structures that seek to exclude, marginalise and problematise Muslims in Denmark. It is important to note here that this is a tactic utilised by young people privileged by their Danish citizenship, higher education and financial stability. In other words, their navigation of racism stands in contrast with a growing number of socio-economically marginalised Muslims who arrived in the past 20 years. In this timeframe, the Danish government created some of the harshest citizenship requirements in the world and are often politically hostile towards 'non-Westerners' (Bendixen, 2020). In general, political discourse that directly or indirectly target 'non-Westerners', often understood to be Muslim, have been on the rise in recent decades (Rytter & Pedersen,

2014). At the same time, there is a growing middle-class Muslim presence who have achieved financial, educational and social mobility.

Convivial narratives as a capacity for action

de Noronha (2022) argues that the ‘convivial turn’ in urban research has almost romanticised diversity, while neglecting to take racist structures and policies into account. Instead, it is essential to go back to Gilroy’s original intent of ‘conviviality’ to get past a superficial analysis of social spaces that risk glorifying diversity while neglecting the effects of racist structures and policies on racialised people’s lives. In line with Gilroy’s previous work (Gilroy, 1993/2013), any analysis on living through diversity cannot be analysed through its own prism but needs to be connected to a wider and more structural understanding of racialised power dynamics as they are expressed in national(istic) discourse and policies.

This point is also highlighted by Les Back and Shamsir Sinha (2016), who emphasise the importance of understanding multicultural conviviality within the context of racist structures. They argue that disconnecting ‘conviviality’ from ‘racist systems’ renders it void of analytic complexity. De Noronha continues this argument by depicting how conviviality is utilised by deported Black Britons to undermine the racialisation of different minorities by state actors and institutions, thus enabling a wider critique of ‘ethnic absolutism’ (2022, p. 162). Sivamohan Valluvan’s analysis of two diverse neighbourhoods in London shows the mundane ways people live and engage with each other across ethnic, racial and religious differences. This is done not necessarily without a consciousness of these differences, but rather an indifference to the groupist assumptions of these differences (Valluvan, 2016). In a more recent article, Victoria Redclift, Fatima Rajina and Naaz Rashid (Redclift et al., 2022) focus on British Bangladeshi Muslims, and how they experience conviviality as a burden to educate, understand and ‘put at ease’ white normative sentiments in everyday life. This ‘burden of conviviality’, the authors argue, is a hidden labour that demonstrates the multilayered structures of racism, where the onus of making diversity easy or indifferent is put on racialised Others.

Bringing this conversation into the Danish context, Linda Lapina (2016) focuses on white residents in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood in Copenhagen. She demonstrates how conviviality among these white residents does not necessarily mean that they refrain from reproducing essentialised and racialised discourse on the Muslim and immigrant Other. Rather, conviviality as a concept needs to be thought through a more complex analysis of social and racialised inequalities and power structures. Lapin concludes how disconnecting experiences of conviviality from an analysis of power structures undermines important questions as to whose convivial experiences are centred and whose experiences are neglected.

Building on these perspectives, I want to expand the conversation beyond the British context and beyond a focus on white Danes, to consider how we can conceptualise conviviality in connection to the agency of middle-class Danish Muslims. This then bridges the conversation on conviviality to one on the interplay between structure and agency. Widening the conversation on urban conviviality to one that includes a perspective on agency expands the sociological imagination to combine both phenomenological and

critical theory in urban analysis. I believe this was the main point Gilroy was making when arguing to adopt conviviality as a concept rather than cosmopolitanism or multiculturalism. I use phenomenology here as a focus on lived experiences and being-in-the-world (Jackson, 1996), while I understand critical theory as an approach to analyse wider structural phenomena of racism and nationalism (Gilroy, 1993/2013).

While conviviality is a somewhat newer concept, the scholarly conversation on agency has existed for much longer. As an empowering concept, agency has often been conceptualised as resistance to mobilise against structures of oppression (Mahmood, 2011). However, this is not what is happening among the middle-class Muslim Copenhageners I spoke to. They were not actively resisting political powers, but rather manoeuvring around and through them to establish their social position while also insisting on their right to religious expression. To be able to understand these manoeuvrings, it is helpful to look at Saba Mahmood's conceptualisation of agency as she observed it among Muslim women's involvement in the Islamic revival in Egypt. She builds on earlier scholarship of Lila Abu-Lughod (1990), who provides a critical reflection of some of her own earlier work on resistance practices among Bedouin women in Egypt. Abu-Lughod suggests that feminist scholarship has often been too focused on understanding resistance as an approach to challenge power. However, she critiques, when we attempt to read resistance as a failure of systems of oppression, we fail to appreciate resistance as a 'diagnostic of power' (Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 42). In other words, we must move beyond the binary of resistance/subordination to understand how specific forms of resistance must be located within fields of power.

Building on Abu Lughod's reflections on resistance, Mahmood takes the discussion one step further by questioning whether acts of resistance can ever be universalised. Rather, she argues, these acts should always be read within the local ethical and political conditions where they are attributed certain meanings (Mahmood, 2011, p. 9). Moving away from an emphasis on resistance, Mahmood argues for a concept of agency that is open to 'semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things and oneself' (Asad in Mahmood, 2011, p. 34). Mahmood summarises how agency might sometimes mean resistance against power, but as a concept needs to be unpacked through the nexus of ethics and politics (Mahmood, 2011, p. 34). She thus defines agency as a *capacity for action* enabled by a particular context. Adopting Mahmood's conceptualisation of agency as a capacity for action rather than explicit resistance to circumvent structures of power opens the concept to alternative perspectives beyond resistance. I have argued elsewhere that this approach to agency allows us to understand how young middle-class Muslims in Denmark do not necessarily mobilise against Islamophobic or racist policies (Hassani, 2022). Rather, they often navigate through everyday racist experiences by rooting themselves within the urban context through spatial narratives. In other words, their capacity to act as middle-class Muslims means that they have an agency that allows them to secure their middle-class positions and challenge racist and Islamophobic rhetoric experienced in everyday interactions. Mahmood's opening of the concept of agency can thus be complexified even further through an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1990). Hence, it is not only the broader political context that allows particular forms of agency, but also signifiers of class, racialisation and gender allow different capacities for action. In this way, young Danish Muslims'

ability to evade racist discourses is contingent on their ability to position themselves through gendered/racialised/classed signifiers within a particular narrative of the respectable Muslim in contrast to the inferiorisation of Muslims dominant in political discourse.

Thinking with Gilroy's concept of conviviality in combination with Mahmood's definition of agency in relation to young middle-class Danish Muslims, I suggest convivial narratives can be read as agency, not in the sense of direct resistance to or mobilisation against oppressive structures and policies, but as a capacity for action. In other words, a way of acting *within* structures of racialisation and *despite* the surveillance, control and marginalisation of Muslims in Denmark.

Methodology: Spatial narratives as method

This article draws on a larger comparative ethnographic study conducted in Copenhagen, Denmark and in Montreal, Canada, in 2013–2014. The study comprised of interviews ($n = 53$), spatial tours ($n = 18$) and participant observation with young Muslims (18–25 years old) in both Copenhagen and Montreal. For the sake of a more contextualised urban analysis, this article focuses on the fieldwork in Copenhagen, where I conducted 23 interviews (13 women/10 men) and seven walks through the city. The interviews and walks were conducted in Danish, and subsequently transcribed, thematically coded and analysed as well as partially translated into English.

All participants were born and raised in Denmark, except four, whose families immigrated to Denmark before they turned five years old in the 1990s. They all originated from Muslim majority countries, except two white converts and one mixed-race convert. Although their families' countries of origin may have influenced these young people's experiences, it did not guide my recruitment strategy, which only emphasised self-identifying as Muslim. Therefore, I only emphasise their families' origins if the youth spoke about it as an important aspect of their lives and experiences. Most of the young people I spoke to were enrolled in higher education and had acquired a level of upward social mobility through educational status or work position and were well on their way to becoming a socio-economically stable middle class.

Constructing a spatial narrative

This article focuses on spatial narratives shared either during sit-down interviews or walks through Copenhagen, in which I asked young Muslims to tell me about their experiences growing up in Copenhagen and show me their version of the city. I took a narrative approach in both the interviews and walks, allowing my interlocutors liberty to direct our conversations to what was important to them. I have chosen to focus on three cases rather than a thematic approach, to allow for the young people's unique narratives to be an entryway to a wider discussion of how young Muslims create convivial narratives to evade the racialisation of Muslims in Denmark.

My approach to using urban walks is based on wanting to understand not the city, but young Muslims' narratives about themselves in the city. In other words, the importance of these spatial narratives were not merely about moving through spaces and experiencing the city with these youth but rather about understanding their associations and meaning

connected to spaces (Campion, 2021). This method draws on Kevin Lynch's (1960) approach to mental mapping. In his book *The Image of the City*, Lynch explores people's associations with city spaces and interrogates how 'legible' a city is to its inhabitants. In this sense, a legible city is one whose districts and spaces are easily identifiable to the people living in it. Copenhagen was legible to the young people I engaged with. They could read the unspoken racialisation and class distinction inscribed into certain spaces. In fact, as a visibly Muslim woman native to Copenhagen myself, the city's spaces were legible to me as well. Our walks, although led by my interlocutors, became an intersubjective experience through which we wrote ourselves into the spaces by our mere presence and visible Muslimness. We sometimes became hyper-visible Muslim Others in white spaces and at other times part of the diverse urbanscape in racialised spaces (Anderson, 2022). Either way, these young people knew which spaces they wanted to include in their narratives to emphasise their belonging and non-belonging to certain spaces. The resulting narratives allowed for a spatial appreciation of how legible the city spaces were to these young Copenhageners. This was manifested through the ease of their movements, the histories they attached to spatial structures and the negative and positive associations they attributed to city districts that they effortlessly moved through.

During the walks, I asked the young people to show me *their* city. Without much further guidance, they decided where to take me around Copenhagen and what to tell me about these sites and narratives. These spatial accounts enable an understanding of how navigating through the city can be an opportunity to challenge the racialisation of spaces. As Vered Amit and Caroline Knowles argue, '[n]avigation shapes the character of space and how we might think about it, through the movements and objects of routes: what passes through a street, a neighbourhood, a city, co-constitutes it' (2017, p. 175). Connecting the idea of moving through space to spatial narratives, Michel de Certeau specifies how spatial narratives – as a way of telling stories through space, or movements through space – can become an “epistemological” modality’ (de Certeau, 1984/2011, p. 115). In other words, narratives of and through space *produce* a knowledge of these spaces. Spatial narratives thus become important epistemological tools to challenge cartographies of racialisation. By navigating through urban spaces and inscribing themselves into spaces in which they are deemed as strangers (according to nationalistic discourse), Danish Muslims insist on their rootedness in the spaces they inhabit. Their insistence is a defiance of the political racialisation of space and the micro- and macro-aggressive attempts to otherise them in everyday spatial interactions.

The racialisation of Muslims in Denmark

Denmark experienced its biggest influx of Muslim migrants in the 1960–1970s, mainly from Turkey, former Yugoslavia, Pakistan and Morocco. However, the political discourse on migration and what was popularly known as 'guest workers' did not consume mainstream media discourse in those early years. These workers were filling a labour shortage and were expected to eventually return to their countries of origin. Neither public discourse nor political policies were invested in regulating migrants' everyday lives and cultural expressions. By the 1990s, many 'guest workers' had permanently settled in Denmark and a larger number of refugees were also arriving in the country. In the early

2000s, politicians started responding to these developments with an increasingly racialising discourse as well as heightened border control and integration policies targeting migrant populations (Rytter & Pedersen, 2014; Wren, 2001; Yilmaz, 2016). These policies have become more explicit in targeting the Muslim population categorised as non-Western and more recently as MENAPT (Middle East, North Africa, Pakistan and Turkey) in national statistics as well as government policies (Bendixen, 2020). Such policies especially affect the most recent refugees arriving in and after 2014–2015. As non-citizens, these refugees have felt the brunt of these policies to a higher degree than the young people I met, who have been able to evade many discriminatory policies because of their citizenship, educational status and socio-economic position.

Although political discourse has become more nationalist and racist in recent years, there is still limited scholarship on how Muslims in Denmark experience racism and Islamophobia. In fact, racism in the Danish context is often thought to be individual bias connected to phenotypical signifiers, and rarely understood as a structural phenomenon of upholding racial hierarchies (Andreassen & Vitus, 2016; Odumusu, 2019). Nonetheless, there have been several studies exploring Muslims in Denmark, looking at issues of identity, integration, local urban communities and even ideas of diversity and conviviality (Lapina, 2016; Rytter, 2010; Schmidt, 2004, 2012). There is however value in expanding the scholarly conversation on Danish Muslims to move beyond a focus on migration patterns and minority identity formations. By shifting the focus to elaborate on issues of racialisation, nationalism and racist structures in Denmark, I challenge an international image of Denmark as an egalitarian post-racial society. This image has enabled Denmark to avoid a critical gaze into how its nationalist (and racist) structures affect its racialised population. I thus focus on Danish Muslims, not merely as a religious category, but as a racialised one. I draw here on the recent field of Critical Muslim studies, which builds on both Critical Race Theory and postcolonial scholarship to create epistemological links between the fields to expand our understanding of white hegemony. This literature argues that Muslims are not simply religious minorities who experience discrimination based on their religious practices – although this is part of it. This discrimination is also based on a racialisation of Muslims which has a long history rooted in Orientalism as well as contemporary political dynamics which racialise Muslims as threats to the nation in the global ‘war on terror’ (Sayyid & Vakil, 2010). In this sense, it is useful to understand the process of racialisation of Muslims as a way of reproducing racialised hierarchies. Garner and Selod (2015) highlight how racialisation is not the same as self-ascription, i.e. Muslims feeling a sense of community based on similar religious beliefs. Islamophobia – as with racism in general – is thus a by-product of a racialised social system (Sayyid, 2010). In his recent book, Tarek Younis expands on this by defining Islamophobia as a way to manage Muslim subjectivity (Younis, 2023). This is an important perspective when exploring how Danish Muslims navigate the boundaries of acceptability vis-a-vis their Muslimness in terms of positioning themselves as middle-class *Danish* Muslims.

The following ethnographic accounts discuss (1) how Danish Muslims experience space as racialising, and (2) how Muslims create convivial counter-narratives in opposition to experiences of Islamophobia and racialising discourse. The two themes demonstrate how Danish Muslims experience ethnonationalist and racialising discourse on the one hand, while simultaneously feeling a deep and personal connection to their city and

urban environments on the other hand. It is in the creative ways these youth navigate through racialised spaces and dominant discourses to carve out a spatial belonging that can be perceived as a particularly convivial way of living in the city while simultaneously being politically vilified and excluded from the national(ist) 'us'.

Racialising Copenhagen's spaces

Before presenting the ethnographic data, it is important to briefly introduce the wider political context of Denmark in relation to current urban policies. Since 2010, the Danish government has distinctly racialised urban spaces through rhetoric of 'ghettos' and 'parallel societies'. This has been done in an attempt to introduce neoliberal policies to privatise parts of the not-for-profit rental housing sector (Risager, 2023). The state demarcates the contours of 'ghettos' based on whether there are more than 50% non-Western residents (which include newly arrived immigrants, nationalised citizens as well as descendants of migrants). The policies introduced through the ghetto law has fixed racialised Others into certain urban spaces and connected them to issues of social deprivation and threats to security (Regeringen, 2018). The Danish government thus writes itself into a long tradition of politicians and urban planners who have essentialised spaces to excuse surveillance and control over racialised urban communities (Danewid, 2020; Hawthorne, 2019).

All my participants were natives to Copenhagen, privileged in holding a Danish citizenship and their socio-economic position. They often explained how they felt comfortable and confident in most Copenhagen neighbourhoods, whether predominately affluent (read: white) or stigmatised for its socio-economic deprivation (racialised as Other). They all found different ways of demonstrating the social meaning they attributed to specific neighbourhoods, irrespective of political stigmatisation. In this way, neighbourhoods that have been targeted by the Danish state's 'ghetto'-policies (Regeringen, 2018), which accuse racialised residents for lacking 'integration', become revamped as *convivial* spaces where people of diverse backgrounds live, work and socialise.

An intergenerational experience of racialisation

The first narrative I want to highlight is that of Iman, a young woman whose family has lived in Denmark for over 50 years. Her mother arrived as a young child and grew up in Copenhagen in the 1970s. Iman's narrative is an intergenerational depiction of how the potentials for a convivial urban life changed with the rise of explicitly nationalist and racist political discourse. The effects of hostile border politics and Islamophobic political rhetoric trickled down to have a real impact in Iman's everyday life. Iman described the very different circumstances between her mother's experiences of life in Copenhagen in the 1970s and herself coming of age in a post-9/11 era:

Now, I have a very 'Danish' mom. We usually tease her by calling her Pernille. Her life in Denmark is completely different from mine. While I was a bitter teenager, she was a hippie-Dane. When she describes her childhood when she came with her parents as a four-year-old, she describes how she would sit on the bus and people wanted to touch her curls, and: 'Wow,

how beautiful you are'. And Danish friends is something completely natural to her, she has a lot of those, even today. (Iman, interview)

Iman grew up close to central Copenhagen, her neighbourhood was however stigmatised as a disadvantaged borough of Copenhagen marked by low-income households, substance abuse and other features of deprivation. Contrary to political representation of deprived urban neighbourhoods as 'non-Western enclaves', the neighbourhood Iman lived in comprised of mostly white Danish residents. She explained that her childhood memories of this neighbourhood were coloured by discrimination and racial abuse in public spaces. For instance, Iman described how she would often receive racist comments on the street from random pedestrians:

I remember one experience with my mom and siblings: people on the bus commented that we were exploiting the system. Back then there was a lot of prejudice against women wearing the headscarf, so they were always shocked when my mom opened her mouth and spoke Danish fluently.

Iman's childhood experience of riding the bus with her mother occurred three decades after her mother's own childhood experience on the bus. As Iman admits in the previous quote, their circumstances for creating a convivial urban life differ heavily. Indeed, the Danish political landscape had changed drastically in those 30 years (Wren, 2001). When her mother came to Denmark with her parents in the 1970s, it was at the height of labour migration from the Global South. Her mother came of age in a time and place where people did not view her mere presence as a problem or a threat to Danish society. This was different to Iman's early childhood. In the late 1990s to early 2000s, when Iman came of age, the political climate had changed drastically, where the vilification of racialised Others was commonplace in both media and political discourse. This was the time when the incident with Iman and her mother on the bus took place. Iman's recollection of this racist abuse has imprinted itself in her memory. People were surprised by her mother's fluency in Danish, thinking she would not understand their racist outburst. A stereotype of Muslim migrants and their descendants often portraying them as lacking integration into Danish language and culture was becoming a dominant narrative in popular representations and had trickled down to everyday interactions.

The racism Iman experienced was especially directed towards her choice to differentiate herself from other Danes by wearing the hijab. In this sense, the hijab became a representation of cultural distinction and was therefore perceived as connoting a lack of integration. Iman's hijab became a representation of strangeness that resisted conforming to Danish (white) normativity (cf. Ahmed, 2013).

At the same time, I met resistance from the surrounding society saying I should take it off etc. 'Tell your father you don't have to wear it!' I often felt defensive: 'I *have* a free choice. No, my parents aren't strict or have high academic requirements for me, and no I will not be forced into a marriage.' It required a lot of energy to continuously try to climb out of the box they put you in, especially in high school.

Iman was treated as a representation of the Muslim female stereotype: presumed to be oppressed by a patriarch, with no freedom to choose her lifestyle. Iman would retort that her religious lifestyle choices were her own. Her defensive insistence on her lifestyle being an autonomous choice rather than a result of family pressure highlights the social pressure she felt to challenge the stereotypes of Muslim descendants. If she could not live up to the imagined Danish homogeneity, she could at least defend her choice by claiming autonomy from her family. She argued against the stereotype of immigrant parents' socially controlling their children, pressuring them to live a particular social, cultural and religious lifestyle that conforms with their 'countries of origin'. The questions Iman faced regarding her parents' level of control may not always have been ill-intentioned. However, to Iman, they always came off as an offensive denunciation of Iman's family relationships. Thus, Iman experienced these encounters with concerned white Danes as racism based on her ethnicity and religiosity. She felt she was not being judged fairly based on her abilities but rather based on her Muslimness and thus lack of Danishness.

In high school, I insisted on being Moroccan, but when I travelled to Morocco, I realised I'm not Moroccan in the least. I'm a product of Denmark, and I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. [. . .] It is a fixed mindset that dominates Danes a lot, but I don't feel it in my everyday life. I choose not to keep up with politics, it makes me too frustrated. Everything that is about being Danish in public space I don't interfere with. I keep my Danishness [*Danskhed*] at home, my ryebread, my *koldskål* [vanilla-buttermilk dessert], I laugh at my Danish movies, I live in Denmark, but everything else I don't get involved in, because there's no room for [someone like] me.

Iman explained further that she used to tell her classmates that it was not her choice to be born in Denmark. So, if her lifestyle was perceived as strange by mainstream standards, she did not perceive herself as Danish anyway. Iman's choice to underline her ethnic difference arose as a particular response to her perception of the exclusivity with which Danishness was being constructed in dominant political and media discourse. If Iman could not be perceived as Danish because of her Muslim lifestyle, then it was not a perception worth struggling over. A convivial life in this instance is relinquishing the battle for labels, and simply keep her Danishness private. If political discourse could not acknowledge Iman's Danishness, she would eat her ryebread and watch her Danish movies in private and disengage from any debates questioning her belonging.

Iman's narrative demonstrates the intergenerational shift her and her mother experienced coming of age in Copenhagen. While there probably were racial tensions in the 1970s and especially during the financial recession in 1980s, Iman's mother had come of age in a time and space where there was less racialised tension in public spaces. This eased her ability to create a convivial life with her white Danish neighbours. On the contrary, Iman's everyday life and social interactions with white Danes both as peers and teachers and in public spaces had been affected by racist and nationalistic political discourse. It resulted in her being defensive and careful whenever interacting with white Danish peers. Her capacity for a convivial life – as opposed to her mother – was based on her ability to disengage from and evade racialising discourse often by avoiding creating meaningful relationships with white Danish peers.

Challenging 'white' space

Khalid is a young man who grew up in inner-city Copenhagen, in an area often stigmatised in political and media discourse. His account presents us with a complex convivial narrative connected to his local neighbourhood, where he enjoyed meaningful relationships with people of very different backgrounds, including white Danes. However, as soon as he left the comfort of his neighbourhood he was often met with racialising micro-aggression.

Throughout his narrative, it seemed important for Khalid to argue for his Danishness and Danish belonging. This was a tendency that could be observed among many of the young people I met to various degrees: emphasising their rootedness, their belonging to the spaces, both locally and nationally, as if to speak against the hegemonic discourse of Muslims as 'strangers'. It seemed that *if* they were not adamant about their rootedness, *if* they admitted a hesitation in their national loyalties, they could be plucked up from the ground and displaced – as if the political threat of expelling 'the Muslim' was a real one.

It was particularly important for Khalid to argue for his Danishness, because he had represented Denmark in international competitions as a national champion in a sport that he had practised since he was eight years old:

I think the reason why I see myself as a Dane is the fact that I represented Denmark for eight years while on the national team. And when I go out into the world and represent Denmark, then it's with the Danish flag and not the Moroccan or Turkish or something else. And people abroad also talk to you as if you're a Dane.

In this quote, Khalid described representing Denmark in international tournaments, where there was no doubt about Khalid's Danishness – he literally represented the nation. While Khalid represented Denmark internationally through his sports achievements, his Danishness was often questioned when competing nationally:

Something that's made me stay away from ethnic Danes [read: white], I'm just going to say it: I have a lot of prejudice and those were already confirmed to me when I was really young, 9–10 years-old, a little cheeky kid, when we were out competing and had won gold, and we were waiting for our medals. It was in Esbjerg [a town in rural Jutland], when a man with a South-Jutland accent comes to me; you almost couldn't understand what he said. Then he says: 'You're actually good at speaking Danish' [imitates a South-Jutland dialect], then I said: 'Sorry, what are you saying?', then he says: 'YOUR DANISH IS GOOD, A'RIGHT.' I just thought, of course I speak Danish, is there something wrong with you or what [laughs]. I told him: 'I speak better Danish than you do.' It wasn't just that experience, we've also been in Thisted, or whatever, Skanderborg, Århus, and all the other places. You're met with prejudice when you leave the environment you're used to here [in Copenhagen].

His experiences internationally made it easy for Khalid to see himself as a Dane and be a representative of Denmark in the international sporting arena. However, admitting his own difficult relationship with white Danes, he also noted that whenever he had to travel and compete *within* Denmark (especially the rural parts of Denmark), he and his teammates – who were also Muslim – would have to face the fact that they were often not

perceived as Danes. The comment from the man from South Jutland in Khalid's quote was not intentionally racist. In fact, the man seemed to be complimenting Khalid on his Danish language skills. However, even as a child, Khalid was conscious of how the man's compliment, in fact, was a way to emphasise Khalid's non-whiteness as a sign of his strangeness and non-belonging. The man would most likely not have made the same comment if Khalid had white-passing features. While Khalid describes his difficulties engaging with white Danes in clear terms, this difficulty fails to acknowledge the meaningful relationships he developed growing up with working-class white Danish residents. This became clear to me as Khalid was taking me around his childhood neighbourhood, including the gym where he spent much of his childhood and youth training. At his gym, we met his old coach, a white Dane from his neighbourhood. Khalid came of age with this coach by his side, who trained and supported the talent he saw in him and his friends. Khalid did not hesitate to disclose his affection for his coach and all of the encouragement the coach had shown him and his friends growing up. The meaningful and validating relationship Khalid had with his coach demonstrates what happens when racialised discourse is resisted by white Danes. Khalid did not describe his coach as 'white' as opposed to how he described many other relationships with white teachers, supervisors and line managers, where he felt the need to address their prejudice before establishing any formal relationships. The gym Khalid grew up in became a convivial space that helped him develop a capacity to navigate the racialised spaces outside the confines of the gym.

Khalid's narrative is an important example of how hegemonic discourse which racialises non-white bodies as 'strangers' becomes a way of racialising all spaces. This was such a significant part of Khalid's experience whenever he left his sports club in Copenhagen and travelled the nation to compete as a semi-professional sports player. There, he would be faced with 'white space' in which he would continuously be placed in a 'stranger' position (Anderson, 2015). His narrative demonstrates how racialised discourse is about upholding racialised power dynamics rather than simply being rooted in any individual bias. It is only when these power dynamics are broken down in everyday interactions that the potential for convivial relationships and spaces arise.

Rootedness and convivial narratives

The previous two sections demonstrate how young Muslims experience the racialisation of space. In other words, how does an increasingly ethnonationalist political rhetoric trickle down from political discourse to everyday encounters and what capacities are needed to create various convivial responses when facing such encounters. This section offers an alternative narrative – one that roots Danish Muslims as part and parcel of Copenhagen's spaces. They are part of the global image of Copenhagen, one of the reasons the Nørrebro district was voted the coolest neighbourhood in 2021 by *Time Out Magazine* (Time Out, 2021). Their presence positions the city as culturally diverse at the same time that the city positions them as socially mobile urbanites (Schmidt, 2013). The young Muslims I met loved living in Copenhagen and its surrounding neighbourhoods and would eagerly identify themselves as Copenhagensers. The city provided them the opportunity to subvert racialising national politics and policies. Living convivially in

Copenhagen was a capacity they established through their social and spatial mobility by rooting themselves within the city's spaces.

Dania was a 22-year-old young woman, born and raised in a rural town, she moved to Copenhagen when she started university. She had since adopted the city as her home. She did not see herself ever moving back to her rural childhood town. In this regard, Dania followed the typical stream of rural-urban migrants who are moving from rural areas in Jutland and Funen to the capital for higher education and professional opportunities (Sørensen, 2015). Dania's appreciation for Copenhagen's cultural diversity and the lifestyle it allowed her became clear in her tour as she took me to her favourite shops and streets in Nørrebro – a culturally diverse part of Copenhagen. Dania took me on a tour to depict an *urban* self-image, as opposed to her rural background.

We met near Blågårdsplads, a side street to Nørrebrogade. This street had been a hub for criminal activity just a few years ago. However, Blågårdsplads has gone through a massive gentrification with trendy restaurants, cafes and vintage clothing stores opening, attracting young Danes seeking a more 'authentic urban' experience. The charm of Blågårdsplads lies in its cultural diversity and its urban history, giving the street character and attracting people seeking an escape from the commercialism that dominates the high streets of Copenhagen. Dania belonged to this segment; as a young university student from the rural suburbs, she sought out the excitement and diversity of Nørrebro. She had turned Nørrebro and Blågårdsplads into her home turf rather than her more affluent Frederiksberg address. The borough of Frederiksberg neighbours Nørrebro. It is a socially better off, wealthy borough with a less multicultural vibe yet still young and trendy. Dania explained that she did not really feel connected to Frederiksberg in the same way that she did with Nørrebro.

It is significant to mention that Dania did not feel a need to underline her Muslimness to me; her hijab was a clear enough symbol of that. What mattered to Dania was to demonstrate what was important to her: volunteering, ethnically diverse grocery stores and urban life. Nørrebro represented this to her, it *was* a convivial space for her.

This is Blågård's Square. I spend most of my time on this street, this walk we're going on now. I shop a lot, but I don't think it's relevant for your project to take you shopping, because that is not where I unfold my Muslim identity. [I do that] more in this context. [It's not] just my Muslim[ness], but also my other ethnic background [*anden etnisk baggrund*] that is more expressed here than it is where I live in Frederiksberg. I don't spend any time there [in Frederiksberg]. I have a nice park right next to me, I've been there twice. It's just not a place [for me]. This [Nørrebro] is where I go with my friends. We'll go by a cafe, where I'm taking you to now, walk over to the NGO, greet people, sit, and grab a coffee with [the general secretary], chat a bit, go to [the mosque]. So, this walk, I come here once or twice a week, do grocery shopping, Arabic vegetables. I bike through here. Halal meat, I buy here perhaps once a month, [I] buy vegetables, squash, if I want a good *sameh* [Palestinian dish], which is stuffed squash with meat and rice – I can't get that at Fakta [Danish discount grocery store]. *Lubia* [wide green beans], *bamiya* [okra], lentils. So, it's also here food-wise that I get to express myself. Food, like Ahaaa [Middle Eastern restaurant], that's popular Palestinian food, it's one of the most student friendly places. They have it here [on Blågård Street] and on Nørrebro Street, I mostly come here because it's more local, where the other [Ahaaa] is fancier.

While we were walking through Blågårdsplads, Dania explained how this street was not just a representation of her Muslim identity but a place where she could express her 'other ethnic background'. 'Other ethnic background' is a political categorisation of non-white Danes that preceded the label 'non-Westerners', which is a more recent political categorisation of non-white citizens. These categories of differentiation – including 'second-generation immigrants', 'new Danes', and the increasingly more popular distinction of 'Muslims' – are all part of a racialising hegemonic discourse that seeks to differentiate between white Danes and Danes of colour. What Dania presents in this extract is how internalised this categorisation becomes, not necessarily in negative terms, but here Dania identifies herself not only with her Palestinian background (although this was also important to her) but in fact sees herself and her cultural expressions as part of this whole group of racialised Others (across ethnic, cultural and phenotypical diversities).

In many ways, Dania's city walk did not represent her history of growing up in rural Denmark. It was not an autobiographical narrative through the streets she had made her own either. Her tour was a construction of a certain version of herself; besides being Muslim and from rural Denmark Dania was also a Copenhagener living in Frederiksberg and biking her way through the urban streets of Nørrebro – or rather, the charming side of Nørrebro that had just the right balance of urban living, trendy cafes and Middle Eastern stores. Dania's tour did not focus on how Copenhagen had become her home through the years, but rather how the sites were ways in which she wanted to represent herself and her convivial life in Copenhagen. The tour was about constructing a spatial representation of self. In Dania's case, this meant including sites that demonstrated everything that defined her as Muslim, Danish and Palestinian. It was more than that however; her tour was not just about representing her national/ethnic/religious identifications. It was about how she saw herself as a young university student who had developed through the years from being a young rural girl in a big city to becoming an urbanite with social and cultural capital allowing her to seamlessly become part of the trendy section of Nørrebro's urban landscape. A truly convivial urban life despite the increasingly ethnonationalist political discourse that seeks to exclude Danish Muslims from the national imagination.

Conclusion

Over a decade of urban policies that problematise 'non-Western ghettoisation' have fixed the city's spaces in racialised representation. These policies have connected this spatial racialisation with socio-economic deprivation. It is a powerful political ploy to equate people of colour with socio-economic deprivation through policy. It thereby succeeds in representing certain neighbourhoods as problematic and threats to Denmark's 'social cohesion'. This article has discussed how such racialisation of spaces is experienced and challenged by those perceived as 'Others' by public and political institutions. The narratives of Iman, Khalid and Dania demonstrate how the inscription of race into city spaces is a projection of the political imaginations of the nation. Such political discourse inevitably trickles down to interpersonal encounters in everyday life. Nevertheless, the three young Muslims in this article – like the other Danish Muslims I met – were not powerless in the face of structural racism and nationalism. Rather, they

convivially counter-narrated their spatial belonging, unfixing the hegemonic representations of urban spaces, and identifying themselves as intrinsically Copenhageners.

To understand this process, I employ Paul Gilroy's concept of conviviality as a way of understanding how young Muslims create a convivial life in Copenhagen despite racist and nationalistic policies and hegemonic discourse. I have argued that these young people's convivial narratives can be understood as expressions of agency. Here, I build on Saba Mahmood's attempts to complexify the concept of agency as a capacity for action enabled by a particular political context, and not simply resistance towards power. Building on this, I have argued that agency is enabled through political contexts, via intersectional dynamics of racialisation, class and gender. This article thus offers a way of appreciating young middle-class Muslims' ability to express a particular form of agency. This is an agency that is grounded in everyday experiences challenging increased ethnonationalism expressed through Islamophobia and racialisation of Muslims as socially and culturally inferior. I have argued that this agency can be understood as the capacity to construct a convivial life – often contingent on their social positioning – in responding to Islamophobia.

In contrast to the young people represented in this article, recent migrants and refugees have felt the brunt of repercussions of heightened border control and racist as well as Islamophobic policies. These have had a detrimental effect on their ability to create social mobility for themselves and their families. The young people I met were privileged in their socio-economic positions, mainly because of their families' long history in Denmark. Many of their families came in the 1970, 1980s and early 1990s from the Global South. Even though many of them grew up on public housing estates, the fact that they had access to free higher education and affordable rental housing close to urban centres helped secure their middle-class positioning. This is a significant point to understand how the young people I met were able to challenge the inferiorisation of Muslim Others in political discourse and public imagination. They moved effortlessly through Copenhagen's spaces and were able to situate themselves and their urban lives in both 'white spaces' as well as spaces that are culturally diverse. They unfixing the government's racialisation of spaces with an ease and conviviality that might not be shared by Others who have arrived in recent years, and thus in a more precarious socio-economic position. Nevertheless, their spatial narratives demonstrate the importance of understanding how powerful nationalist structures influence the everyday life and opportunities of racialised Others. It also impacts the creative ways these young Muslims can negotiate, navigate and contest these structures through everyday encounters and spatial mobility. It is in this capacity that they formulate their convivial urban narratives.

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Notes

1. Participants' names are pseudonyms and any identifying details have been obscured to ensure their confidentiality.
2. Non-Western countries include all countries in Africa; South and Central America; Asia; all countries in Oceania (except Australia and New Zealand); Albania; Belarus; post-Yugoslavia states; Moldova; Russia; Turkey; Ukraine; as well as stateless individuals (Danmarks Statistik, [www.dst.dk/da/Statistik/dokumentation/hvadbetyder#](http://www.dst.dk/da/Statistik/dokumentation/hvadbetyder#,), accessed 7 June 2023).

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