Navigating Colour-Blind Societies

A Comparative Ethnography of Muslim Urban Life in Copenhagen and Montreal

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Assemblages of Muslim Racialisation

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What happens when we start to unpack the idea of a colour-blind society? In such a society, racialised hierarchies are neglected and racism is invisibilised through colour-blind frames. However, rather than make "racism" disappear, it becomes omnipresent. This is done through racialisation processes that produce Others that are presented as diametrically opposite to Us. In this chapter, I present a framework of assemblages to unpack how colour blindness reproduces the racialisation of the Muslim Other.

Race rarely figures as a native term within Denmark and Quebec. It is assumed to be something that other *more* imperial nations have, such as the US or UK. This chapter shifts the focus from the US and UK in the conversation of "race," and instead emphasises societies that rarely acknowledge any racialised hierarchies. Rather, as colour-blind progressive societies, they have established a national image of egalitarianism, meritocracy, and equal opportunities. I want to challenge this perception through the lens of Muslims' positioning within these two societies. Focusing on racialisation *processes* instead of a categorical analysis of "race," I emphasise the dynamic and fluid process of racialising Others, and in the context of this book, particularly Muslims. With racialisation processes, our attention is directed towards social, cultural, material, and phenotypical signifiers instead of "biologic" essentialist notions of "race." Understanding racialisation processes as part of an assemblage enables us to recognise the social and urban spaces Muslims navigate through as part of a whole that is comprised of components that are interrelated and intersubjective. In turn, we shift our focus from "race"/"ethnicity" to an awareness of the often implicit processes of racialisation that ripple through social and spatial contexts.

As will become clear throughout the book, most of the young people I met were either part of a comfortable middle class or had achieved social mobility through higher education. Almost in contrast to this book's introduction as well as this chapter, these young Muslims in both Copenhagen and Montreal would rarely speak of racism, Islamophobia, or experiencing the effects of an increasingly hostile political discourse towards Muslims and other racialised minorities. Instead, their narratives were filled with positive experiences—of supportive school environments, sports clubs, religious communities, and of "ethnic" shops and restaurants that expand borders and communities. 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. It would be easy to use these narratives to confirm that Denmark and Quebec are in fact post-racial societies. However, in this chapter, I contend that these narratives are essential to understanding what is going on within the deeply racialised yet imagined colour-blind societies that are Denmark and Quebec.

I introduce assemblage theory in this chapter to conceptualise how the process of racialisation trickles down from dominant political and media discourses to their material expression in urban spaces and in everyday social life. Racialisation processes thus influence intersubjective experiences and interactions. Such interactions are not always examples of racist encounters, but sometimes depict the double consciousness that Muslims have adopted while growing up during an era of heightened racialisation and structural infringement on Muslims' rights. The chapter then moves on to explore the urban spaces the young Muslims navigate through. Political campaigns often filled public spaces as a constant reminder of the white gaze over the Muslim Other. Nevertheless, Muslims in Copenhagen and Montreal's diverse spaces seemed to find creative ways to challenge, circumvent, and sometimes redefine these spaces by taking over the political attempts to invisibilise and make them non-relevant to the city image. Instead, by invading these public spaces by their mere presence, and other times by their transforming of a space to become a marker of Muslimness or Muslim solidarity, they found ways to challenge the image of the white hegemonic nation.

Racialisation Assemblages: Between Process and Socio-spatial Affect

Thinking of racialisation as a process within a larger social system invites us to think about what components sum up this process. This is where the idea of assemblages becomes useful. As a concept that focuses on the interconnectedness and fluidity of entities, it allows us to explore racialisation processes in political, social, and spatial formulations and their effects on both white and racialised (in this context: Muslim) populations. At the same time, it allows for these formulations to remain fluid according to time and context. Assemblages are useful to think with because although they allow for power dynamics to play a factor, they do not pre-empt them. In other words, racialisation processes involve powerful actors, who can dominate social and spatial imaginaries of the racialised Other, but their affect is part of the analytical process. This approach allows social actors a level of agency, *a capacity to act*. In other words, it allows white actors to either undermine or reproduce these processes, and it allows racialised Muslims to internalise, circumvent, or challenge these processes. As an analytical tool, assemblages thus allow us to scrutinise different entities within the assemblage without instilling them with *a priori* qualifiers.

My approach to assemblages builds on Alexander G. Weheliye's (2014) idea of racialised assemblages as sociopolitical and relational, and Jasbir Puar's (2018) conceptualisation of assemblages as intersectional. With this approach, I introduce a way of contextualising and relationalising the way Muslims in Denmark and Quebec experience, narrate, and sometimes undermine or disregard sociopolitical processes of racialisation. In other words, there is an assemblage between political discourse of racialising Muslims; the racialisation of public spaces; the way these ideas are adopted by the white majority; and finally, the experiences and response of Muslims in these two societies. Both Weheliye and Puar draw on Delueze and Guettari's assemblage theory to conceptualise their approach. However, instead of synthesising the details of Delueze and Guettari's theory, I use the idea of assemblage theory as summarised by Weheliye as well as Puar to think with as a backdrop to understand society in general. What is relevant for this chapter is to appreciate the relationality of all components within society. The idea of viewing society as an assemblage helps us to understand the interconnected processes of racialisation. There is an important link between political discourse on Muslims (and racialised Others in general) and the ripples this discourse creates throughout society both in material terms (images of dangerous Muslims, barriers in public institutions, etc.) and in intersubjective terms (relationships with white Danes/Quebeckers, internalisation of inferiority, etc.).

I follow here Weheliye's approach, which, although drawing on poststructuralist theory, introduces the idea that people experiencing dehumanisation and political oppression are not necessarily defined by these experiences but rather find ways of circumventing, undermining, and dismissing such political oppression, demonstrating the power of hope—and possibly the agentic components of hope. The young Muslims I met in Montreal and Copenhagen were not consumed by their experiences of Islamophobia and racism; these experiences were often a backdrop to their lives in general. This is perhaps because the cohort of participants I met were socioeconomically secure, socially mobile, and often national citizens. In other words, they could navigate both the political and urban landscape with an ease of mind that, no matter their political exclusion, they had legal status, financial security, and social position.

Drawing on Stuart Hall and Spivak among others, Weheliye's approach utilises assemblages as relational connectivity across social entities. Anything that can be interconnected can become part of an assemblage: human, non-human, objects, discourses, spaces, etc. Racialisation processes are complex because of this interplay between a wide range of social entities. Assemblage theory as initially introduced by Delueze and Guettari tried to counter the hierarchical perspectives of poststructuralists, like Foucault, by introducing a non-hierarchical conceptualisation of society. Weheliye merges the two approaches by acknowledging the role that power dynamics play in assemblages. However, power dynamics are here understood as one of

many entities rather than an all-encompassing structural phenomenon. In this sense, he demonstrates how the power of the state/nation or political violence/oppression is rarely all-consuming of people's lives. There are ways of creating assemblages away from and parallel to experiences of racism/nationalism/state oppression.

It is useful to include Jasbir Puar's (2013, 2018) approach to assemblages to Weheliye's framework. The way Puar approaches assemblages forces us to move away from binary assumptions about social positions and categories and allows us to conceive of various other formations of interconnectedness. With this approach, she builds on Kimberle Crenshaw's (Crenshaw, 1990) concept of intersectionality, which focuses on the multiple levels of discrimination working-class Black women experience in the US, related to their race, gender, and class position. The idea of intersectionality helps us to consider the intersecting ways racialised populations experience discrimination. In the following quote, Puar unpacks the issues with intersectionality and assemblages, respectively, but then demonstrates how the two concepts can in fact complement each other:

> There are different conceptual problems posed by each; intersectionality attempts to comprehend political institutions and their attendant forms of social normativity and disciplinary administration, while assemblages, in an effort to reintroduce politics into the political, asks what is prior to and beyond what gets established. So one of the big payoffs for thinking through the intertwined relations of intersectionality and assemblages is that it can help us produce more roadmaps of precisely these not quite fully understood relations between discipline and control.
>
> (Puar, 2020)

Thus, by combining an intersectional approach to the concept of assemblages, we can understand the fluidity of racialisation processes as well as the social and spatial connections that are constructed through these processes. Drawing on both Weheliye and Puar's conceptualisations, the assemblage of Muslim racialisation involves several entities that all of which influence how Muslims are viewed and treated in societies. These include political, popular, and media discourses that dehumanise, otherise, and essentialise Muslims (e.g. political rhetoric, news media representation, popular images). They also include more materialistic expressions of access to resources (e.g. social policies, housing, jobs). Finally, they include social and spatial expressions where discourses and material discrimination may influence intersubjective relationships in everyday life. Nevertheless, it is within the social and spatial fields that Muslims can navigate and contest their racialisation. Muslims are able to navigate these assemblages to various degrees based on their intersecting identifications, including their class, gender, citizenship, visible Muslimness, and phenotypical signifiers. These identifications present different limitations and potentials for resisting their racialisation. What is important in the Quebec and Danish context is that these assemblages can

exist without ever explicitly recognising the processes that racialise Muslims, creating an illusion of colour blindness.

The rest of this chapter will attempt to make the racialisation processes of Muslims explicit by unpacking how Muslims navigate, evade, or challenge various assemblages of racialisation in social and urban spaces. While this chapter focuses on racialised assemblages, it should not undermine the other assemblages these young people are connected to that allow for a more complex appreciation of their different experiences.

Ripples of Racialisation

For over two decades, if not more, the hijab and niqab have often become the centre of political attention when discussing overt religious symbols in Quebec and Denmark with political demands to regulate Muslim women's dress. As such, the hijab and Muslim women's dress in general have been important aspects of racialising Muslims in political discourse. Hijab thus becomes an object Muslims, women in particular, have to engage with and respond to. Not only when interacting with non-Muslim society, but even internally within Muslim contexts (more on this in chapter 3). It is therefore not surprising that it was a prevalent symbol in the narratives of the young women I met, whether they wore hijab or not. The young men, on the other hand, did not experience the same kind of overt reification of their Muslimness based on their dress in political discourse. They did, however, face a different set of challenges related to the prevalent political suspect of the violent Muslim man (Bhattacharyya, 2009). These stereotypes of "violent Muslim men" meant that these young men invested time and effort in engaging and challenging these ideas through (1) benevolent responses to racialised expressions in everyday life and (2) treading carefully around these racialised images of the Dangerous Muslim Man/Oppressed Muslim Woman.

In general, both the young men and women often seemed to have to navigate the difficult terrain between respectability and their self-chosen Muslimness. In the Danish context, Musa, a young man working in the hotel business while finishing his university degree, explained,

> Initially, I try to indicate that I'm Muslim. So, if a colleague invites me to go to Christmas lunch or something else non-Islamic, I try to reject it in a subtle way […]. A problem I often face because I work in a hotel: most receptionists are young women, so there's a chance of physical contact, for example shaking hands. So I usually use the line "I only shake hands with the old or ugly, and you're neither" – they take that pretty well.
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> (Musa, Copenhagen)[1]

1 All quotes have been transcribed ad verbatim and Danish quotes have been translated into English.

The symbolic gesture of shaking hands in Denmark has been a contested politicised marker of difference between "the white Danish us and the Muslim Other." It has been interpreted by politicians as a sign of disrespect of gender equality to the point that the now former Integration Minister, Inger Støjberg, passed it into law as part of the citizenship ceremony. In this regard, she argued,

> If you don't want to shake hands with the mayor [during the citizenship ceremony], it can be understood as a clear sign that you don't believe in gender equality. That's inherently why there are Muslims who don't want to shake hands with the opposite gender. So, I definitely think you can say that this is essential.
>
> (quoted in Olsen, 2018)

It is within this political backdrop that Musa attempts to negotiate his position. The only way to make it palatable to his white female colleagues is by being charming and attempting to flatter them. Racialisation processes as a political ploy thus become deeply entrenched into everyday interactions. In other words, political discourse influences the social field Musa must navigate. It influences not only Musa's way of interacting with his white female colleagues, but most likely also influences his colleague's ability to read his refusal to shake hands as a sign of Muslimness, and possibly even a Muslimness that oppresses women. The political racialisation of Muslim men as inherently oppressive paints the canvas of Musa's intersubjective engagement with his white colleagues. The assemblage here creates an interconnection between "Muslims opposing gender equality" (political discourse)—"Muslim Men" (social position)—"White Women" (social position). Musa, as a self-identifying Muslim man, has to navigate a cartography of racialisation created by political discourse and legislation that paints him as oppressive. His white female colleagues inhabit this same cartography, which Musa attempts to pre-empt any potential conflict through charm and humour. This interaction demonstrates the complex challenges that these young men face trying to navigate a system that vilifies them *a priory*.

Contrary to Musa's example of navigating the racialised assemblage as a perceived oppressive Muslim man, Muslim women had to navigate this assemblage as oppressed victims. This created a different dynamic, where instead of hesitation and fear of being perceived as violent, the young women experienced having to prove their independence and competencies. For instance, in the Quebec context, Leyla explained the struggle of dealing with assumptions of passivity because of her intersecting identifications as both Muslim and woman:

> I feel like [the more] you try to convince [people] that you're good enough] the more tired you get. Like, I do my best, and if they ask, I will prove [myself], but I don't need to prove without asking me …

Especially when you're already in a situation where you are [seen as] *soumise* [submissive].

(Leyla, Montreal)

In a similar way, Iman from Denmark explained how she often was put in a defensive position trying to challenge the preconceived image of the Oppressed Muslim Woman:

At the same time, I met resistance from the surrounding society saying I should take it [the hijab] off etc. "Tell your father you don't have to wear it!". I often felt defensive: "I actually have a free choice. No, my parents aren't strict or have high academic expectations of 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, Copenhagen)

Contrary to Musa's narrative, which reads as a careful navigation through a rigged terrain that assumes his potential for violence, these two young women had to stomp their way through the images of their oppression. Figuratively, climbing out of the box they are put it by insisting on their confidence, independence, and capabilities.

The final example I want to draw on is about a young man, Adam, who was raised Christian, born in Iran, and immigrated to Quebec with his family when he was a child. His case demonstrates how Quebec, as well as Denmark for that matter, is part of a wider global geo-political discourse on the threat of the Muslim. Adam explains that living in Iran during his early years exposed him to a Muslim environment, which meant that post-9/11 in Canada, he had a more nuanced understanding of Muslims:

Every time there was issues, especially obviously after September 11, everyone was talking about Islam, and so forth. My attitude was never the attitude of most people, whereas it's something foreign, they don't understand it so they kinda characterise it in different ways. Whereas for me, it was something I knew, you know, it's not "other" for me. And I would always find myself in a position of defending Islam and Muslims, and just, like, giving [Muslims'] side of the story even though I wasn't Muslim, you know, it was just normal. Like, I remember in Religion-class in high school, I got into this whole argument with the teacher because he was characterising [Islam] in a certain way, and I was like: "No, it's not like that, you're comparing it wrong", and I'm pretty sure he got the impression that I was Muslim. So, they started this whole "Dialogue with Muslims," and they were like: "You should come," but I was like: "But I'm not Muslim." It just kinda happened like that. And obviously, I looked Muslim, I was Persian, so there's a

lot of associations for people to make. I just felt it was funny […]. They would just assume I was Muslim because I looked the part, and I spoke out for it and I knew more about it than most people, so they just put me in that category and labelled me […]. I just found it really funny, but it didn't make me angry, like: "How could you say that."

(Adam, Montreal)

Adam explains here how people in his school environment would often assume he was Muslim simply because of his ethnic origins and his opposition to post-9/11 negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. He indicates here the general tendency of conflating religious and ethnic identification, especially regarding Muslims in the Global North. This demonstrates how the ripples of racialised assemblages connect it beyond the national or even local level to global geopolitical connections of the "War on Terror." Furthermore, it connects the assemblage beyond the self-ascribed Muslim as the racialised Other to include the assumed-to-be Muslim Other.

Racialisation in Public Space and Counter-processes

In the above section, I unpacked how young Muslims in Copenhagen and Montreal experienced racialising discourse as a backdrop they had to be conscious of when interacting with white colleagues, teachers, and sometimes even friends. This backdrop affected them differently according to intersecting identifications, including but not limited to gender, class, migration background, ethnicity, and displays of religious symbols (note how such qualifiers complicate the racialisation assemblage). In the next section, I want to demonstrate the interconnectedness between racialisation discourses and how they are expressed through spaces.

The Interconnection between Racialisation Processes and Spatialisation

Understanding space as part of an assemblage is not really a new idea. In fact, many urban theorists make insinuations to assemblage theory in their relational approach to spaces. Doreen Massey (2013 [1994]), for instance, argues how space and place are intimately connected with social relations. Likewise, Henri Lefebvre (2014)[1974]) contends that social relations are the foundation of spatialisation—the production of space. Massey highlights how these ideas of connection have been well-developed by Marxist theorists who have demonstrated the relationality between space and class. In her book *Space, Place and Gender*, she builds on this literature (her own included) to emphasise the importance of understanding how gender and the construction of gender relations too are profoundly connected to space (Massey, 2013). While she indicates that race is another important social concept that needs to be explored in relation to space, she does not delve much further. Drawing on this idea of space as essential to understanding social categories and relations, I argue that there is a profound connection between space and the processes of racialisation. These processes

cannot be untangled from the construction of class and gender but must be understood within the intersection of these (Crenshaw, 2018).

Racialisation affects Muslims through their social interactions as well as their spatial experiences (Razack, 2002). In this sense, it becomes important to explore how identifications of "race"/ethnicity, class, gender, and, in this context, Muslimness influence each other in spatial terms (ibid. 15).

In the political discourses that fuelled the campaigns in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, the Muslim was the focal point. Consequently, Muslims are expected to demonstrate the state's definition of gender equality and other liberal values to avoid being seen as working against state values (Quebec) or be associated with what the Danish Conservative People's Party have named "Nazi-islamism." With these images, the Muslim becomes racialised as a symbol of cultural inferiority and a potential threat to the liberal secular state. Most people passing by the billboards in the Montreal metro station (Figure 1.1) or downtown Copenhagen (Figure 1.2) may not experience how space can become a place which (re)produces racialisation. However, for many Muslims—both those who are marked by religious signifiers and those who are not—such spaces become something they inevitably must navigate

Figure 1.1 "Church. Synagogue. Mosque. Sacred—Equality between men and women. The State's religious neutrality. All also sacred."—parti Quebecois (provincial government party in Quebec in 2013). National campaign billboard at a metro-station in downtown Montreal, advocating "The Charter of Values" (Bill 60) banning "ostentatious" religious symbols in public spaces.

Figure 1.2 "Stop Nazi Islam ism"—Conservative People's Party 2015, National
Election Campaign Billboard in Copenhagen. Photo Credit: Francis Dean/
Corbis News via Getty Images.

through. Navigation in this sense is about the creative ways they explain,
contest, or even ignore these spatial signs of exclusion.

   Muslims in Montreal and Copenhagen may not have had the politi-
cal legitimacy or power to resist such political campaigns in any effective
way. However, what if we revisit Mahmood's claims of agency here (see
"Introduction"). By conceptualising agency as a capacity for action rather
than direct resistance, the objective becomes to circumvent racialisation pro-
cesses rather than the almost impossible task of dismantling it. This approach
thus enables us to appreciate other avenues of reclaiming public space that
does not necessarily intend to dismantle the power dynamic of the assem-
blage. It may in fact even reproduce reified symbols of Muslim racialisation.
Nevertheless, in doing so, Muslims can insist on their right to the space. For
instance, Figure 1.3 is taken from the Islamic Awareness Week at a university
in Montreal, where people can try on the hijab:

   It is important to mention that hijab was not worn by all female vol-
unteers at the Muslim Student Association. Yet this stall was an impor-
tant one during the controversy of "The Charter of Values" (Bill 60). The
Charter attempted to prohibit hijab, and other "ostentatious" religious sym-
bols in public spaces, supposedly to ensure secularity and gender equality.
By actively reifying a symbol of Muslimness, which is a dominant image

Figure 1.3 Poster for the "Try on hijab" stand during a university's Islamic Awareness
　　　　　Week, Montreal.

of Muslim women in public consciousness, Muslim students were able to double down on the exclusionary discourse of Bill 60, which particularly disadvantaged hijab-wearing women. They invited onlookers to demonstrate acts of solidarity and allowed for connections and alliances to be articulated. Muslims reifying the hijab in this way is not without its consequences, but in doing so, they challenged the prescriptions of Muslim gender inequality that the government had implied during the public debate on Bill 60.

Figure 1.4 is an image from a public iftar dinner during Ramadan in Copenhagen. A Muslim charity (DM-Aid) hosted a public iftar which included a call to prayer (athan) and communal prayer (salah) on the square in front of Copenhagen City Hall in 2016. In similar ways as the IAW in Montreal, this iftar was a way to use a public space to establish Muslims' belonging to the city. While politicians have been arguing for Muslims' incompatibility with Danish national values, the iftar was a way to challenge this narrative representing Muslims as a visible part of the country's capital city.

These two examples demonstrate how racialised Others can use "public spaces as a way of making a claim to them, that they belong within this space" (Shortell & Brown, 2016). Caroline Knowles points out that race is a part of the texture of space; she continues, "space is in fact a composite, active, archive of politics and individual agency" (Knowles, 2003). The political campaigns, presented in the two political campaign posters, are physical

Figure 1.4 Public iftar dinner during Ramadan at Copenhagen Town Hall Square, 2015, Copenhagen. Image reprinted with permission from the organisers at DM-Aid. Photo Credit: DM-Aid.

manifestations of racialising discourse taking over public space, and thus, space is co-opted into the assemblage of racialisation. Muslims' movements through such spaces—particularly hijab-wearing women—can be understood as their inevitable contestation of this racialisation and insistence on being part of this public space, regardless of racialising politics attempting to spatially otherise them. Young Muslims moved through such spaces consciously and deliberately—they invaded these spaces, in the words of Nirmal Puwar (Puwar, 2004)—thereby contesting the spatial exclusion. In fact, often, they had no choice; they could not avoid inhabiting these spaces, despite their hypervisibility. It is in unpacking such racialised dynamics within spatial interactions that we can appreciate the interconnection between space and racialised discourses.

Conclusion

Research on race and space has often been concerned with addressing socially constructed categories of difference. The focus has been mostly on class—being concerned with the intersections of economic and political power (Neely & Samura, 2011). This chapter has expanded on this literature by introducing a theoretical framework of racialisation assemblages, where

space is one entity in a multitude of entities that affect racialisation processes. By comparatively drawing on ethnographic data from Copenhagen and Montreal, I argue that the concept of assemblages allows us to create more complex analyses of racialisation processes in colour-blind societies that do not recognise racism as part of a social system.

Exploring racialisation processes in both social *and* spatial terms helps us to unpack the different and interconnected experiences of these processes. How do social interactions create potentials for challenging or reproducing racialisation? And how do spaces become actors of racialisation, privileging some people over others, while also providing potential for resistance and counter-narratives? These have been the main questions of this chapter through which the theory of assemblages provides a fluid and complex framework for analysis of racialisation processes. Once we appreciate the interconnection between space and social life, we can appreciate how space is socialised through people's everyday movements, uses, and interactions in space. Spatialisation—the social production of space—thus becomes drawn into the assemblages of racialisation and imbued with racialised dynamics and negotiations. In other words, racialisation, social life, and spatialisation are part of the same assemblage and are thus interconnected processes.