

# Racialized Spatial Attachments – Researcher Positionality and Access in a Danish Suburban High School

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## Abstract

Danish high school's rising ethnic/racial diversity and tendencies of segregation call for explorations of students' educational experiences of racialized differentiation. This article unfolds methodological reflections on this endeavor, by focusing on researcher access. Not only is space a medium through which racial relations materialize – space is also interconnected with access. If researchers depend on relations for access to sites of inquiry, which depends on how researchers are read by actors in the field, it is critical to scrutinize the spatial dimensions to such readings and what knowledge is (allowed to be) produced. Unfolding two ethnographic vignettes, the researcher's positionality of passing is analyzed to explicate the relationship between racialized bodies and racialized spaces. I propose the notion of spatial attachments as an analytical lens for explaining such body–space confluences to illuminate the interconnectivity between educational spaces and the broader external world, and to expand the language to address racialization in the colorblind context of Danish high schools.

**KEYWORDS:** education, racialization, researcher positionality, passing, racial spaces, spatial attachments

## Introduction

*In recounting incidents at school, which have felt racist, two racialized<sup>1</sup> female students foreground an incident, where a white, male classmate suddenly shouted “Fuck Vestegnen!” at them and ran off. Vestegnen is a region west of Copenhagen, labeled as a socially deprived area with high ethnic/racial diversity. Neither of his recipients is from Vestegnen or poor, but they are both visibly racialized. They wondered: was his comment euphemistically racist? (Fieldnotes)*

Spaces hold more than physical attributes; they carry symbolic meanings (Barajas & Ronnkvist 2007). In a school environment, such as Bakke High School (BHS), students’ bodies not only gain meaning from where they dwell at school, but also the spaces beyond with which they are associated. Michelle Samura (2016) emphasized that body–space relations offer a rich avenue for examining racialization in education. Therefore, it is worthwhile exploring the insights gained from applying Samura’s suggestion of sensitivity to body–space relations when analyzing researcher access to sites of inquiry. I explore this path, by asking: What does it mean for ethnographic fieldwork in racialized high school spaces to work from a seemingly ambiguous, racialized researcher position of passing? I address what implications the positions available to me have for my fieldwork, and hence the knowledge produced, and explore the implications of passing and non-passing as a white, ethnic Danish Christian, whilst being a second-generation immigrant of Kosovar-Albanian origin with a Muslim background. This inquiry is pertinent because the infusion of meaning into spaces not only shapes the environments traversed by students, teachers, and researchers but also underscores the relation between the researcher’s body and the school’s landscape. A relation which shapes the research endeavor, inasmuch I must be accepted into a space to conduct research. In this regard, the article focuses on researcher access, as

something intricately intertwined with students’ spatial negotiations. Thus, this article responds to the demand for methodological approaches in antiracist research by scrutinizing racialized possibilities of access in research.

Following feminist intersectional scholarship, which maintains that researchers are intrinsically embodied and biased (Mama 1995; Peake 2015; Faria & Mollett 2016; Doshi 2017) producing situated knowledges (Haraway 1988), I focus on the spatiality of knowledge production. I do so by interrogating the relations between racialized bodies, space, and access by developing the notion of spatial attachments based on the empirical data generated during fieldwork observations as part of a larger research project.<sup>2</sup> First, I outline existing literature on researcher-researched relations in fieldwork. Second, I provide the theoretical framework that connects racialization and space by utilizing the concepts of racial spaces (Neely & Samura 2011) and passing (Lapiņa 2018). Through this combination, I propose the notion of spatial attachments as an analytical lens to elucidate ways in which bodies and spaces are read as extensions of one another in ways that reproduce or disrupt existing racialized formations. To this end, I draw on theoretical perspectives from poststructuralism, critical race theory, and feminist intersectional theory situated within a transdisciplinary field of human geography, anthropology, and education. This is followed by methodological reflections regarding access, positionality, and collaboration and then by an analysis of two ethnographic vignettes. The analysis reveals how space becomes a medium through which racial relations manifest and provides researchers with a language to address the racialization of everyday interactions in the colorblind context of Danish high schools (Samura 2016; Lagermann 2019).

## Researcher–Researched Relations

Previous research on researcher–researched relationships in the exploration of racialization processes within education has yielded valuable

insights. As articulated by Ann Phoenix (1994), ‘race positions’ of both the researcher and the researched, along with their respective positions of power, permeate the research encounter in dynamic and multidimensional ways. Kum-Kum Bhavnani’s investigation into white youths reveals a reversal of the usual power balance between racialized researchers and interlocutors perceived as white (Bhavnani 1990, cited in Wright 1998). A reversal, which hinges on the presumed power dynamic between white researchers and non-white interlocutors. Cecile Wright (1998) echoed this through her own analysis. She illustrated her position as an African-Caribbean woman based in the UK, finding herself “caught in the crossfire” (ibid., 67) of relations between predominantly white teachers and African-Caribbean students within British schools. Her interlocutors’ perceptions of her shifted across different school spaces, and served as entry points for Wright to investigate the impact of “‘race’ positions” (ibid., 77) within distinct contexts of the research setting. In engaging with these contributions, I refrain from comparing my own positionality with theirs. Passing as a white ethnic Dane presents its own set of dynamics. Iram Khawaja and Line L. Mørck (2009) accentuate the intricate and multi-layered nature of researcher positioning when studying various racialized groups. They advocate for transparency in acknowledging the theoretical, personal, and political implications inherent in the researcher’s role throughout the research process. This includes an examination of how their visible Otherness or perceived whiteness can influence access and methodological possibilities (ibid.). They identified theoretical and personal standpoints, research methods, as well as ethnic and racial body signs as crucial elements intersecting with the field of study, shaping researcher positioning, the research process, and its subjects (ibid.). Following Khawaja and Mørck’s perspective, I work toward increased transparency through reflection on the researcher–researched relationship, recognizing its pivotal role as a precursor to knowledge produced.

## Racialized Spaces

Research across various disciplines, including anthropology, geography, and law, has explored the relationship between race and space (e.g., Agnew & Duncan 1989; Blomley 1989, 1994; Feld & Basso 1996; Kobayashi & Peake 2000; Delaney 2002; McKittrick 2006). These contributions have challenged the positivist view of space as mere containers for human interaction. They maintained that space is socially constructed, just as the social is spatially produced (Harvey 1973; Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1994; Gieryn 2002) and that power relations are tightly woven into physical spaces. María Lugones wrote:

Your life is spatially mapped by power. Your spot lies at the intersection of all the spatial venues where you may, must, or cannot live or move. Those intersections also spatialize your relations and your condition with respect to the asymmetries of power that constitute those relations (2003, 21).

George Lipsitz (2007) wrote of the ‘spatialization of race’ and the ‘racialization of space’ to emphasize the inherent spatial dimension within the lived experience of race and the racialized dimension within the lived experience of space. Caroline Knowles (2003) underscored the spatial dimensions of race-making, too. Her argument, based on the fluidity and mutability of spatial and racial meanings over time, posited that space operates as an active archive, encapsulating history and encompassing social relationships and processes that constitute racial structures (ibid.). She argued that the construction of race as a category be understood as spatial practices. Brooke Neely and Michelle Samura (2011) introduced a theoretical framework to investigate the (re)production of race relations through space, which is also applied in this article. They advise we approach racial spaces by foregrounding their overlapping characteristics to unveil how both race and space are “contested, fluid and historical, interactional and relational, and defined by inequality and difference” (2011, 1941-1945). This framework

enables analyses of processes wherein racialized distinctions shape space and spatial configurations perpetuate racialized differences.

Few studies have explicitly explored the race–space relationship in high school contexts. In the US, Laurie Olsen (1997) found that students with immigrant backgrounds undergo what she calls ‘Americanization’. To achieve social and academic integration, students feel compelled to conform to the inflexible four-category racial system in the US, which is perceived by students as encompassing ‘Black, white, brown, and yellow’ categories, because friendships form along racial lines. In the UK, Sara E. Truman (2017) elucidated how students’ racialized and gendered bodies are subjectively experienced as ‘out of place’ within the school. Similarly, Mary E. Thomas (2011) explored students’ spatial practices. Their practices were governed by logics of ‘(in) correct placements’ on the social map of the school, and were influenced by, *inter alia*, how the students were racialized and gendered. Thomas argued that the body is a product of its relations to others, often shaped by discomfiting encounters. She emphasized that students’ narratives of feeling either in or out of place underscore the significance of intersubjective spatial negotiations in the process of coming to terms with social relations, norms, and differences within the school context (see also Gottdiener & Malone 1985; Eckert 1989; Barajas & Ronnkvist 2007; Samura 2016).

Recently, new materialist/posthuman perspectives have emerged in Nordic educational studies as an extension of the spatial turn. These perspectives analyze how educational spaces shape subjectivities and learning experiences by considering the role of affects and materialities (Hultman 2011; Lenz Taguchi 2015; Juelskjær & Rasmussen 2019). Carla Chinga-Ramirez (2015) investigated the experiences of racialized students in a Norwegian high school, analyzing the impact of school structures, organizations, and discourses. Tina Mathisen (2020) examined Othering processes using affect theory to understand how the ‘foreigner’ category is produced through racialization, involving spatial separation, skin

color, and language. Moreover, Dorthe Staunæs and Manté Vertelyté (2023) delved into racialization, by examining diversity work as micro-interventions aimed at cultivating affective atmospheres. While I am inspired by the significance of materiality, affect, the body, and space in the formation of racialized differentiations in education from new materialist/posthuman perspectives, this article positions itself within poststructuralism. It focuses on racially coded spaces at BHS, emphasizing the interplay between the discursive constructions of spaces and bodies, and how this impacts the relational dynamics of social life at school. Poststructuralist thought in human geography enables spatial imaginaries that recognize multiple meanings emerging from competing relational systems (Massey 1993). Emphasis is on ways in which subjects are embedded within spatialized materialities. This theoretical stance’s key features can be summarized as follows: (1) Spaces are open and interconnected, shaped by various practices and processes, some of which emerge from within, while others emerge from without. (2) Spaces are seen as multiplicities, co-constructed through differing spatial practices and forms of belonging. (3) Contestations over how spaces should be read may occur, leading to the emergence of domination and resistance strategies that link to spatial identities and practices. (4) People and spaces are ‘entangled in heterogeneous processes of ‘spatial becoming’ (Murdoch 2012, 21–22). Drawing support from these four points, I propose the notion of spatial attachments. The notion elucidates the interconnectivity between school spaces and the broader external world. Our structural positioning in society is spatialized and is constituted via the material reality through which our experiences, opportunities, and networks form. We carry these experiences enmeshed with spaces, into the school, in which sharedness/differences is activated in relational encounters. Emerging friendships across homogeneities at BHS foster differing spatial practices throughout the student body. These practices are oriented toward specific locations within the school’s physical space. In essence, attachments to locations beyond the

school may serve as a means of making oneself comprehensible to others within the school, resulting in the acquisition of a sense of belonging. Thus, one becomes through space, and space offers possibilities of becoming. Lastly, this notion of spatial attachments remains indefinite, open, and fluid. It is always contextualized and rooted in the embodied, material, and temporally specific space. Rather than aiming to represent a singular truth, it provides a framework for my engagement within the field, acknowledging my limitations and situatedness (Haraway 1991; Thrift 1999, 1996, both in Murdoch 2012).

### Passing and Spatial Attachments

My position as a young, female, second-generation immigrant of Kosovar-Albanian origin and Muslim background allowed me to pass as a white, ethnic Dane in the field. Furthermore, students mistook me for a student, a teacher, or someone from SSP<sup>3</sup> depending on my placement in space and proximity to others. Given that my understanding of BHS is contingent on my points of access, it is pertinent to contemplate my access in relation to my ambiguous position, which held both possibilities and limitations. There is an often-overlooked spatial dimension to knowledge production, which relies on access. At BHS, my access was influenced by my interlocutors' racialized readings of my body. Put differently, the process of entering BHS from my position, as someone who passes, revealed the significance of race in the social-physical landscape among students. Racial passing is a concept and phenomenon primarily connected to Afro-American's experiences of being read as white (Smith 1994; Ahmed 1999; Kroeger 2003). Building upon the insights provided by Linda Lapiņa, who argued that bodily surfaces are produced via notions of difference that 'stick' to bodily markers (Ahmed 2004), and in conjunction with the social spaces they pass through/dwell in, as a continuous process of becoming, passing is here comprehended as a multifaceted process that is "inherently discursive, embodied-material, and affective" (Lapiņa 2018, 58). Furthermore, it

represents a subject position that demands labor in the form of negotiating (in)visibilities during relational encounters (Piper 1996). Reflecting on the ever-shifting subject positions available to me as someone who passes into spaces sought access to, to pass can be considered as a pass to somewhere (Khawaja 2015). Passing as a pass into sites of inquiry points to the reading interlocutors stabilize of the researcher before and during the granting of access (Khawaja & Mørck 2009) and, consequently, the types of knowledge that can materialize. Danishness is an emerging un(re)marked majority positioning, within reach for certain bodies (Lapiņa 2018). My body did not pose a hindrance in accessing white spaces, as Danishness is phenotypically proximate to whiteness (ibid.). While (South)Eastern Europeanness may be perceived as 'lagging behind' and never 'quite-as-white', this position does enable passing as (West)European (Lapiņa 2018; Lapiņa & Vertelytė 2020). This is because Muslimness is primarily associated with brown and black bodies and is far less connected to Danishness (El-Tayeb 2011). My passage became challenged when seeking access to a cohort of racialized students as my body did not overtly convey my somewhat racialized position:

Ahmed: Are you new?

Tringa: I'm a PhD student.

Derya: She's 26!

*My age provoked a collective shock reaction from the cohort. They asked what city I'm from, what Folkeskole I attended, and neighborhoods I've lived in. The spaces I mentioned are associated with the working class and high ethnic/racial diversity.*

Derya [pauses]: May I ask... what ethnicity are you?

Tringa: I'm Albanian.

Ahmed: Are you then Muslim, too?

Tringa: Yes.

Derya: I could tell you're something other than Danish. I guessed perhaps Bosnian. *She immediately invited me for a walk to the supermarket nearby and repeatedly to the couch where the racialized second-year*



*students hang out onwards. Later, she added, I look half-Danish.*  
(Fieldnotes)

The excerpt highlights the students' recognition and reading of my spatial attachments, revealing a racialized reading of my body based on my relation to different spaces (being ethnic Albanian in relation to the neighborhood) and subject positions (Muslimness). The connotations sticking to the spaces mentioned makes it relevant to clarify "What ethnicity are you?" and "Are you then Muslim, too?" as if the spaces are reserved for specific racialized bodies and subject positions and therefore necessitates an explication of how I fit into them. We may be intelligible to others by our spatial attachments. Attachments that have inscribed in them spatialized race-relations that organize social life (Bonilla-Silva 2010): from school landscapes to city structures and to relationships between countries of the Global North and Global South (Massey 1993). The intelligibility of people and their subject positions may entail mapping out the locations of their lives, each of which carries its sets of discursive connotations. Thus, the record of our locations may become activated in various ways, depending on where we are, with whom, and for what purpose. However, as demonstrated in the opening quote of this article, some bodies' spatial attachments are assumed upon a glance at their appearance, showing the intertwined nature of spaces and bodies. At the same time other bodies' spatial attachments require clarification. David, an ethnic Danish student, is a case in point. Two racialized students account for their white, male classmates' distrust toward David's aesthetics and his friendship choices: "They talk so much shit about him ... *that wannabe perker!*<sup>4</sup> – because he hangs out with us" (fieldnotes). David's lifelong proximity to and friendships with racialized Others enabled through his upbringing in a multicultural area marks him as strange among some of the white students. He carries his location of upbringing with his body into BHS visible through mannerisms, language, and clothes and becomes an intelligible, proximate subject to some racialized students. With this consciousness of the

connotations sticking to various spaces, I maneuver through the field, recognizing that aligning my body with spaces imbued with different sets of meanings influences readings of my body (see also Howarth 2002). This circles back to Lapiņa's (2018) conceptualization of passing as a discursive, embodied-material, and affective process. Therefore, I conceptually and analytically interlink the concept of passing with spatial attachments to capture and nuance how race functions implicitly, how bodies are understood in relation to spaces, and how this affects access and the ways it is possible to navigate the tacit normalized instances and imbrications of (presumed) whiteness within this field.

### Methodology: From Fieldnotes to Ethnographic Vignettes

After several high schools rejected my proposal for collaboration, I opted for BHS due to its geographic location [5] and a prior collaboration with the school, which I anticipated would streamline my access. The research process encompassed two concurrent phases spanning from April 2022 to January 2023. During the initial phase, I conducted participant observations in selected classes, establishing contact with students who, in turn, facilitated my entry into a group of racialized second-year students (ages 17–19) who frequently gathered on a couch located at the rear of the cafeteria. These early observations by the couch informed my theoretical and methodological decisions, centering on the examination of embodied and spatial processes of racialized differentiation and belonging, as expressed through students' movements, interactions, and narratives. My regular presence in this space led to a snowball effect in recruiting participants for interviews. After three months of observations, I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with students, employing a mobile interview technique known as spatial tours (Elwood & Martin 2000; Hassani 2018). These interviews aimed to understand the students' dynamic utilization of, attachments to, and navigation within BHS. I continued to observe

in-between the interviews. Lastly, the empirical data pertaining to teachers and the school administration derive from observations and informal conversations with them. While not the primary focus of this study, these interactions provided valuable insights into the broader context of the field and were considered too significant to be disregarded.

During fieldwork, I noticed homogenous friend groups formed along racialized differences, evident in how they occupied physical spaces. This urged a body–space focus. Various incidents scattered across time appeared as fragments containing important information about the school’s landscape and understanding them required connecting the pieces together. For this article, I employed focused coding (Emerson et al. 1995) of the material, inspired by Neely and Samura’s (2011) approach. I explored the interconnection between race and space as manifested in the collected data. I conducted a line-by-line analysis, first examining the fieldnotes, identifying instances related to race and then to space. Subsequently, I honed in on the material relevant to my access, where race and space intersected. To uncover meaningful connections within these selected excerpts, I documented my insights in theoretical memos that specifically centered on body-space confluences. Upon revisiting the material, I expanded my analysis beyond merely examining how certain spaces within BHS ascribed significance to the individuals occupying them but also to the complex interrelationship between how bodies were perceived in relation to spaces both within and beyond the school environment and explored the manifestation of these interconnected processes at BHS.

I wrote selected fieldnotes into two ethnographic vignettes: one describing my access to the school and the other detailing my access to the student community by the couch. Vignettes enable narrative descriptions of specific scenes, inviting readers to witness moments of insight and the analytical conclusions reached (Schöneich 2021). I wrote extensive fieldnotes after each day of observation and combined the fragments into comprehensible texts or “stories worth telling” (ibid.

122). This is a stylistic choice, which “presents analytical assumptions as the truth” (ibid. 118). I unsubscribe to the idea of objective knowledge and recognize the inseparability of theory, empirical data, and the researcher. The vignettes must therefore be understood as inseparable from me and my theoretical stance (Emerson et al. 1995). Nevertheless, assembling the fragments into vignettes convey my navigation and access in the field, indicating how my body took an orientation over time at BHS.

### Bakke High School’s Educational Space

The politicized space of BHS is influenced by the growth of racialized diversity in Danish high schools (DST 2019). This demographic shift has given rise to the formation of ‘white’ and ‘brown’ [6] schools (Bloch & Jessen 2017) in which students cluster into ethnically, racially, and religiously homogeneous friend groups (Mørck 2007; Khawaja 2015; Rambøll 2019). Student dispersal politics seek to curb this tendency (Regeringen 2018; Ministry of Children and Education 2022). In a context characterized by Nordic exceptionalism (Gullestad 2002; Browning 2007; Loftsdóttir & Jensen 2016), conversations surrounding racialization, racism, and difference often encounter reluctance or resistance (Hervik & Jørgensen 2002; Berg 2004; Rasmussen 2004; Danbolt & Myong 2018). Paradoxically, political discourse draws on notions of parallel societies (between Danish whiteness and racialized Muslim Otherness) and groupings, to advocate political intervention in racialized homogenized spaces.

Due to BHS’ location, the student composition is relatively diverse in terms of socioeconomic class, spanning from upper middle- to working-class backgrounds. Although the school borders a working-class neighborhood with high diversity, there has been minimal racialized diversity at BHS. Only recently has racialized students’ presence become more noticeable, landing at 9,12 percent in 2022. The inclination of racialized students to appear as a separate entity through

homogenous friendship groups in the social landscape of high schools worries principals and politicians (Bloch & Jessen 2017), alluding to the framework of comprehension structured upon political discourses on parallel societies. The concern with ethnic/racial homogenous ‘groupings’ should be understood in relation to political expectations to the school as an integrating institution, as well as the bodies it is to contain and how. The selection of BHS as a research site is underpinned by a notable pattern; some students seek refuge there as an alternative to their local ‘ghetto’ high school, while others contemplate leaving BHS in pursuit of what they perceive as a more favorable environment for racialized students in different schools – an example of bodily orientation through spaces informed by race. Within the confines of BHS, racialized students are dispersed across classes, lines of study, and grades, but congregate by a couch behind a stage in the cafeteria, forming two distinct but merging cohorts. One unifying factor between these two groups is their racialized status, albeit along different parameters—either as Muslim or as Black. In previous years, the gathering spot for racialized students was near black leather couches in the lounge area, which were among the first sights encountered upon entering through the main entrance. However, these couches have since been replaced with tables intended for schoolwork (see also Khawaja 2015; Staunæs & Vertelyté 2023). As one employee describes it, the racialized students “hide back there now.” The remainder of the cafeteria features long rectangular tables primarily occupied by white students.

### Positionality, Maintaining Access, and Collaboration

Negotiating access to ‘the couch’ was an ongoing process that required continuous engagement. My multiple social positionings in terms of race, ethnicity, class, religion, age, and gender were not sufficient on their own to gain/maintain access. It involved answering questions about the research project, my personal life, the nature of my presence at BHS, sharing opinions, advice, personal

experiences, and jokes. My positionality was tested throughout the fieldwork, and the development of my rapport with the students was a dynamic and evolving process. It started with the students asking probing questions to detect inconsistencies in my responses, and it progressed to forming genuine friendships, connecting on SoMe, meeting one another’s family members, inviting me into their homes, and addressing me as *abla* (older sister in Turkish). This echoes the point put forward by Grimaldi et al. (2015, 141) that “a full problematization of researcher positionality requires going beyond a categorical understanding, in so far as it is relational, unstable, not fixed, and contextually situated.” My positionality underwent a process of mutual negotiation, where my access to their world was contingent on the trust I earned through my engagement and openness. Once comfortable, a student asked,

Murat: Tringa, were there many perkere [4] when you were a student?

Tringa: No, I was one of few. And there was no couch. You have each other, and that’s a big difference between my high school years and yours. (Fieldnotes)

Discussions about shared and differing experiences as well as my chosen theories and methodologies emerged, and many students displayed a high level of transparency. I reminded them of the research’s scope, emphasizing aspects that should remain off the record, and offering the option for partial or full withdrawal of any information they had provided. In exchange for access to their life stories and experiences, I extended the same offer to them. Recognizing the inherent power imbalance in this dynamic, where I write about their experiences, it became imperative to uphold the principles of knowledge production that prioritize the protection of the represented and marginalized subjects’ right to control the knowledge generated about them (Baker et al. 2004, in Swartz 2011). Redistributing power over knowledge produced meant involving the students in my writing process. I invited those who expressed interest to participate in a discussion group dedicated to the



forthcoming analyses for collaborative engagement in the research.

## Vignette I: Accessing the School

BHS is familiar to me due to a previous collaboration that amounted to a critical ethnographic report. The result received no response from the school. I contacted the Head of Education (HoE), my acquaintance of a decade, to propose continuation of our cooperation. Our acquaintanceship might have impacted his immediate acceptance. When he, the vice principal (VP) and I met the following week, my old report was printed and annotated:

*The 80 pages laid in two piles in front of them. The HoE encouragingly said, “it’s interesting with the whiteness perspective” and “good that you’re critical” twice, with a careful smile, and quick nods. The VP was silent. Being asked to describe the current project, I suspected access relied on an ability to describe how it differs from the old report. This time, I intend to explore students’ negotiations of norms, under the project title “racialized differentiation.” The VP explained they have declined other PhD candidates, “who have probably been rejected by many schools and figured they’d find one far away that doesn’t know them. We dismissed them to support your career instead.” I am granted access, as long as I am aware that the political nature of such projects can damage the school.*

As I entered BHS, I felt indebted. The school’s willingness to welcome me reflects its progressive approach to research and its concern for all students’ well-being, perhaps also influenced by social justice movements, especially as a historically white school with increasing ethnic/racial diversity. Nonetheless, this access was granted with a measure of caution. It is an access that does not hinge solely on my passing – after all, we know each other well. Access may instead rely on the

spaces that I carry into the meeting room. These spaces encompass not only the university I represent but also a shared attachment to the school, despite our vastly different entries into it. Our mutual connection to the school and local community becomes a path to negotiate my researcher loyalty. This stands in contrast to the ‘unknown’ rejected PhD candidates from ‘far away’, who have no affective investments in upholding the school’s positive reputation. The inherent political nature of research pertaining to “racialized differentiation,” conducted by a racialized researcher has prompted a cautious approach. This dynamic highlights what Puwar (2021) conceptualized as archives (paper, bodies, landscapes, buildings, feelings, etc.) carried with the body into the field of inquiry. The notion of carrying not only stresses how we are always embodied as knowledge creators, impacting the research we undertake, but perhaps, I suggest, also shapes our bodies in how they are perceived within a space. In addition to the project’s then-provisional title, the VP may interpret my body as carrying life experiences of being racialized as a Muslim minority into the realm of knowledge production on Danish educational institutions, and thus anticipates a critical perspective related to my interest in the role of race in education, a subject that is typically positioned as external to Danish public discourse and schools. Carrying these life experiences and spaces into the domain of critical race scholarship shapes my entry into BHS and influences the reception of the forthcoming research.

(Educational) Spaces are never neutral but always imbued with contestations over how to define and use them. The negotiation of access to BHS’ space as a research site demonstrates our social positions as “defined by differential control of resources and access to power” (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, 18, in Neely & Samura 2011, 1938). The VP controls my access, and I control the school’s representation in my work on racialization. My representation of the school depends on the type of access granted. My request to conduct critical analyses may function as a contestation of the meaning of BHS, as the request construes it as a relevant site to conduct such research. The

research's political potential to create change demonstrates how spaces are not fixed but are constituted in fluid processes, through performative, embodied experience (Thrift 1996, Rose 1999, both in Neely & Samura 2011). My arrival is timed with BHS' historically high ethnic/racial diversity and nationwide implementation of student dispersal politics (Regeringen 2018). BHS is positioned amidst these politics that aim to recenter Western whiteness as the somatic norm (Puwar 2004) of Danish high schools. My critical gaze on this recentering provokes a warning, which underlines the institutionalized whiteness (Ahmed 2012) of the space I am about to enter or, in other words, the whiteness "already in place," and the whiteness-as-something-soon-to-be-disturbed (ibid.):

*The administration selected classes to grant access to – all quite homogenously white, contrasting the ethnic/racial diversity observable in the common areas. Then, a teacher invited me into her (more diverse) class, known as "troubled" among teachers. In this class, I met students from the group of racialized second-year students who frequent the backstage couch. I exited classroom observations to spend time with them upon invitation. Time passed. I posted on LinkedIn my newfound direction for my project: racial spaces. HoE "liked" my post, but the "troubled class" was thereafter made inaccessible for my observations. Furthermore, absence would now be registered for interviewees, contrary to previous utterances. This meant that students with high absence rates were hindered from doing interviews with me.*

Perhaps HoE connects my shifting research focus on space with an increasing focus on the school's role.[7] It is not just about students' negotiation of norms anymore. He, my gatekeeper, is in a vulnerable position as he may be considered partly responsible if this study is too critical toward BHS. He navigates a complex terrain comprising institutional hierarchies, education policies, news outlets, running a school responsibly, securing its

survival via continuous funding, current and future students, their parents, etc. This exemplifies how multiple power relations between differently positioned actors with varying interests in the field co-construct the empirical material allowed to be produced. I experience HoE's decisions as blockages to my knowledge production, necessitating renegotiation of my access through complete transparency about my theories, methods, interview guide, and observations. Later, when BHS hired two senior ethnographers from another university to conduct research, students' absence was not registered for their participation. My unequal conditions to conduct research do not rest on having been hired but on generous, contingent access. Importantly, the other researchers did not carry racialization in their project title, names nor bodies. Contributions to whiteness studies argue that privilege—invisibly to white subjects (McIntosh 1989)—circulates through whiteness via easier access to resources, opportunities, and social/economic advantages (Frankenberg 1993; Lipsitz 1998). Gatekeepers co-constitute our researcher positionalities by their readings of us, reflected in the access granted. The unequal allocation of opportunities among us researchers highlights the 'what' we carry into the highly politicized high school space, namely, our bodies' differing spatial attachments, that enable or constrain our access to opportunities within the field.

## Vignette II: Racialized Placement in Space

The second vignette explicates my researcher positionality in contact with students as an entry point to the operating logics at school. In the introductory days of fieldwork, it became apparent that students use BHS' spaces differently. As analyzed by Liselotte Ingholt (2007), student communities, shared habits (academic, social, and leisure), and participation are interlinked and unfold spatially. The institutionally structured pace of daily school life imbues communities with temporariness and students with a bodily orientation, as they (re)construct communities in every break via routinized

wanderings through space. The reconstruction of communities via habitual bodily orientations was also informed by racialized homogeneity. It is the first most notable characteristic of the social life at BHS due to its visual display of the separation of skin tones, clothes, hair, and eye colors. The slow immersion into BHS presents a series of moments that point to the intertwining of racialization and space:

*I observe a racialized boy, Emre, playing at the foosball table with two racialized male friends. They're dressed in black sporty streetwear, and Emre has black Nike Vapor-max sneakers on. They play amicably and competitively, using lingo associated with male, racialized, working-class youth. It's just us in the space. They glance and smile at me several times. I smile back, not hiding that I'm paying attention. Minutes later, students flow into the gym hall for a presentation. To not get in the way of anyone, I place myself on some stairs, behind the many chairs reserved for students. Soon, teachers scatter onto the stairs next to me. Emre walks by and sees me. His facial expression turns serious. He says something to his friend, who also gazes at me with seriousness. In the following days, whenever Emre spots me in the cantina, his smile turns to almost anger. His reading of me has transformed. Days pass. In the meantime, I start "hanging out" with racialized second-year students. Once they find out I'm an ethnic Albanian Muslim, and have a similar housing history as some of them, they repeatedly correct my placement in space: "Tringa, what are you doing here? We're sitting over there!" They insist I join them by the couches. They greet me with personal handshakes, and I dress as the casual version of myself: in baggy men's t-shirts, loose jeans, and sneakers: not New Balance, Asics, nor Adidas (as these are brands primarily worn by white students) but Yeezy's. In the meantime, I ignore Emre. He often sees me with his friends. One day he greets Murat, with whom I'm conversing on*

*the couch. They exchange mundane words, and Emre dwells for a few silent moments. I say: "Murat, every time your friend sees me, he stares at me, as if I owe him money." All three of us laugh loudly.*

My observation of the foosball game did not elicit a negative response from the students. Instead, their curious smiles hinted at a potential gendered and sexualized reading of me, contingent upon perceiving me as a fellow student. Factors such as their age, language usage, bodily surfaces, and clothing choices, informed my understanding of Emre. Emre's reaction to my sudden appearance among the teachers transformed the nature of our initial encounter into an instance of authoritative surveillance. My passing as an ethnic white Dane added a connotation to the felt surveillance upon my proximity to the teachers, on 'the teacher's stairs.' Research indicates that visibly racialized men in Denmark feel regularly monitored via gazes (Khawaja 2011), are labeled as troublemakers in schools (Gilliam 2009), and are subjected to "ethnic profiling" by the police (Søndergaard 2022). Consequently, I gave Emre the space to approach me at his own pace, with the intention of not exacerbating the perception of our encounter as one characterized by surveillance. My established proximity to Emre's friends complicated his perception of me as an authority figure. The couch was a place rarely sought after by teachers; only the Muslim, racialized janitor visited it. My welcomed trespassing of their informal territory rubbed off onto my body, signaling Emre's friends' assessment and acceptance of my positionality – a figure that was not overly unfamiliar. When I initiated direct contact with Emre, my reading of him guided me to employ an appropriate relational repertoire: a hint of confrontational humor. I mark my non-authority (Ringer 2013) and racialized status by translating an Albanian youth slang expression into Danish, as a method to make myself recognizable, as humor is densely culturally coded and affective (Vertelyté 2022). Simultaneously, I addressed Emre's misconceptions about me in front of his friend, Murat, a move that someone in a defensive position might avoid. This clarification

served to assure Emre that our interaction did not adhere to the typical teacher-student relation. Emre's laughter helped dissipate the unspoken, accumulated tension between us, opening up the possibility of forging a different kind of relational space.

The second vignette engendered considering racialization at BHS as linked to students' utilization of spaces. My ambiguous positionality in the process of seeping into the school's social landscape excavated (in)correct placements related to racialized readings of bodies (Thomas 2011). As a passer, my body was made intelligible via the intersection of the social categories I embody, with an emphasis on my spatial attachments. The relevance spatial attachments gain to the social life at school blurs the boundary that separates the internal and external realms of the school: it points to how spaces beyond the school are inherently racialized (Bonilla-Silva 2010) and how these spaces co-construct BHS' social fabric. Crucially, some bodies' spatial attachments are presumed, as exemplified by the "Fuck Vestegnen" incident, where preexisting connotations "stick to" the body (Ahmed 2004) via space. In other cases, bodies gain intelligibility through their relations to spaces, such as my placement on the teachers' staircase or the backstage couch. In both scenarios, we observe the emergence of racially coded spatial becomings emerging from the intricate interplay between spaces within and outside of BHS.

### Concluding Remarks: Access as Interlinked with Race and Space

This article delves into the complexities of access to a Danish high school and the interplay between spatial dynamics and racialization. I have reflected upon my researcher positionality of passing as a white, ethnic Danish Christian and used it as a point of entry to argue that space and racialization must be considered as interlinked in the co-constitution of a social/physical relational educational space. Through two ethnographic vignettes, I propose the notion of spatial attachments to conceptualize ways in which bodies can be understood

from their spatial becomings and belongings that reference locations with racially coded connotations. In Vignette I, the process of accessing the school unfolds as a negotiation of, *inter alia*, power of representation and researcher loyalty. The latter is in the field perceived as bound up on a presumed shared affective investment in the school's positive reputation due to my past contact with the school. Put differently, my spatial attachments are activated in becoming a recognizable subject, an ally, in my politically sensitive research endeavor. Navigating the dynamic opening and limiting of access experienced during fieldwork is also affective and intuitive pointing toward the often affective and tacit ways in which processes of racialization unfolds in education (Zembylas 2015; 2021). As shown in Vignette I, engaging with race, racialization, and racism in this context is a speculative act, pointing to the simultaneous absence and hyperpresence of race mirrored in euphemistic speech (Guschke 2023). Grappling with space is a place to begin. Exploring the relationship between race, space, and affect might be the next step to untangle this absence/presence further.

Vignette II deepens our understanding of how spatial dynamics intertwine with racialization within school. Student communities and their participation are intricately linked to spatial configurations, with racialized homogeneity as a prominent characteristic of social life at BHS. In seeking access to students, my positioning within these spaces, as both a student-like observer and a racialized researcher, highlighted the reciprocal influence between body and space: racialization undergirds how space matters to bodies' intelligibility. The racialization of bodies is an important element to understand the co-constitution of the different spaces within the school. Interestingly, Vignette II also hints toward how one's relations to spaces outside of school may gain importance to one's physical placement within school and how we carry different archives of meanings, relations, categories, and spaces with us. My reflections upon access from a position of passing and spatial attachments have paved the way to consider the interplay between spatial configurations and racialization within a school. This provides a



foundation for further investigations into increasingly diverse educational institutions. Taking positionality seriously creates greater transparency for the (situated) knowledge produced and advocates for a more nuanced approach to education research that considers the multifaceted nature of educational spaces and the experiences of students within them.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Acknowledging that such words are contextual, challenged, and changing over time, I apply the term "racialized" to denote the process that racialize people as non-white. Here, minoritization

is understood as interwoven with the process of racialization. I also apply terms used by the interlocutors themselves when relevant.

<sup>2</sup> Project description: <https://projekter.au.dk/educational-experiences-of-racialized-differentiation>

<sup>3</sup> Cooperation between schools, social authorities, and police.

<sup>4</sup> 'P-rker' is a derogatory slur targeted at racialized Danes. It emerged in tandem with the arrival of Muslim guest workers in the 1960s and is an abbreviation of Persian (*perser*) and Turkish (*tyrker*).

<sup>5</sup> Between luxurious villas and a so-called 'ghetto'-turned-'area of prevention.'

<sup>6</sup> Synonymously referred to as *ghetto schools* by politicians and the media if they contain more than 30 percent racialized students.

<sup>7</sup> Concern about the portrayal of the anonymized school produced by such theoretical and methodological incisions points toward the neoliberal structuring of high schools as they are granted funding per graduated student. A teacher phrased it: "The school's battles for the students, the student's battle for the schools."