

## Research and education on racism in Denmark: The state of the field – and where to from here?

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### Creating spaces for discussion between scholars studying racialization and racism

This piece is based on a roundtable discussion that took place as part of the Danish Gender Studies Conference on 19 August 2022 at the University of Copenhagen. The roundtable was planned by the three special issue editors to publish it as part of this special issue. **Iram Khawaja**, associate professor at the Danish School of Education (DPU) at Aarhus University, and **Lene Myong**, professor at the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Stavanger, chaired the discussion, while Bontu Lucie Guschke joined as a discussant.

Research on racism and racialization in Denmark lives between and across many research fields - education studies, gender studies, media studies, migration and refugee studies, global

studies, and cultural studies to mention just a few. As scholarship and teaching on racialization and racism in Denmark seem to be growing and expanding, we wanted to provide a space to bring together scholars who work within different theoretical and disciplinary fields and from different racialized positions to initiate dialogue and discussion not only about their research projects but about the state of the field - if we can even call it a field - of racialization and racism research in Denmark. The ambition of the roundtable was both to stimulate critical dialogue on how research on racialization and racism has emerged and evolved in a Danish context and to discuss in which direction anti-racist research and education might turn in the future. In preparing the roundtable and inviting the discussants, we as editors were aware of the challenges and risks in addressing questions about racialization, structural racism, and the logic of white supremacy in Denmark - ranging

from potential exclusions within academia to attacks against scholars, as also elaborated on in the roundtable discussion. Yet, we agreed that we find it important to insist on creating spaces for continuing our dialogues and organizing meeting points, such as this roundtable, to strengthen the research community on race and racism. We are deeply grateful to the scholars who accepted our invitation to join the roundtable and who shared their perspectives, insights, and experiences so generously.

Six scholars who research racialization and racism in Denmark joined the roundtable: **Bontu Lucie Guschke** who at the time was a PhD Fellow at Copenhagen Business School, investigating racist and sexist harassment and discrimination at Danish universities from an intersectional perspective. **Elizabeth Löwe Hunter** who at the time was a PhD Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley, where she was working on a research project that focuses on the African diaspora in Denmark. **Jin Hui Li** who is an associate professor at Aalborg University, working within the field of racialization with a focus on the relationship between transnational students in higher education, the development of the nation, and the welfare state in relation to identity. **Oda-Kange Midtvåge Diallo** who at the time was a PhD Candidate at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Her dissertation is an exploration of 'black study', black feminism, and community building among African-Norwegian youth. **Mira C. Skadegård** who at the time was an assistant professor at Aalborg University, researching structural discrimination, racism, and racialization in education and workplaces. **Ferruh Yilmaz** who is an associate professor at Tulane University in the US. For many years, he has been studying how political processes influence the view of Muslim immigrants in Denmark.

The discussion has been audio-recorded and transcribed by Signe Bech Nystrup Andersen, student assistant at Aarhus University. The version below has been slightly adapted by us as editors, in agreement with the discussants, to fit the format of a forum article. This means that some passages have been cut out, and some sections have been rearranged, however, without altering

the content and context of what was said. The roundtable was arranged around several questions about the field of racialization and racism studies, the questions, topics, and bodies that have been excluded from this field, the relation between racialization and racism research and gender studies, and which ways forward it is possible to go in regard to strengthening the field, the research, and positioning of it in times of political mobilization against researchers and academics engaged in studying racialization and racism.

## Towards establishing a field of racialization and racism studies

**Lene: What do we understand as the field of racialization and racism studies in Denmark? To what extent does this field even exist?**

**Elizabeth:** I appreciate that you added that second question. People often say: "Oh, you're in the U.S., but you're studying Denmark. Why? That's a paradox". And for me, that's completely necessary and logical that I had to leave to do exactly this. Also, being in my final year, a lot of people ask me: "Okay, are you going to search for jobs in Denmark?", and I am thinking: 'If I wanted to, where? If I wanted a postdoc, who would be my advisor? Where would I be? And also, wouldn't I be completely alone?' And then there's that whole extra burden of being tokenized. So, would I want to? This completely toxic shutdown of people who dare to challenge the status quo is just so extremely violent. It is impossible to work under those conditions, I mean, you people who are in Denmark, you do it, but also you are penalized for it. So, the whole thing about 'Is there even a field?': No. Because there is no institutional backup.

**Mira:** I was just thinking, no, we don't have any Danish field, and we don't have enough departments or any departments – or, we have one department, otherwise we wouldn't be here. But mostly everyone, like you were saying, is alone everywhere. But if we look at the research over time, race has figured as a thing in different ways implicitly or

explicitly in the ways we could approach or address race. Because in the seventies and eighties, there have been some researchers that used the word - I think like three, but they were there. So, there is a history to this in a Danish context. But we also need to remember, we are a little thing in a much broader context. The field does exist. It exists in a lot of different ways and across a lot of disciplines and in a lot of different countries, and that's what we need to remember and draw on. You need to do a little bit of detective work because it will be under 'integration' or 'immigration' or any of these other ways in which we can hide it. I'm just saying, there is something. It may not be a formalized field in a Danish context, but we have to remember, there is a history we have to respect, which we are situated within.

**Oda-Kange:** Yes, the research is here, and we are doing research, but is it really a field? I'm not sure. But something you said, Elizabeth, made me think about what has happened just recently within the last two years, something that I'm very wary of. The result of the Black Lives Matter uprising that also happened in this part of the world, at least for me, made it so that from one moment to the next suddenly my phone was ringing all the time with all these opportunities. This momentum, this idea that 'now is the time' - now you can talk about all of these things that you have been trying to talk about for years and years and years. And it was so much that it became too much, and I had to check out completely. And then once I came back, it kind of died down. So, I have this feeling that this "field" is very, very fragile, and it is also kind of held up by trends or what is interesting right now but is there a long-term commitment to trying to change and trying to actually dig deep into the roots of racism here and not just echo some buzzwords or trends that come from the current political debate?

**Ferruh:** I'm not sure that there is a field. If there isn't a field, it's not unique to Denmark. For example, one of my mentors is one of the biggest names in America about race, George Lipsitz, and he has never worked in the field. So, racism research has always been in communication departments,

gender studies, anthropology, sociology, so, there has never been a real field about racism studies, I think. And this is not unique.

**Hui:** I think about it historically. It seems like we also suffer from memory loss. In the 1980s in the Danish context, there was huge articulation in the media about racial violence. It was in the daily papers, such as Ekstra Bladet or BT. "Raceuro" (race riots) was mentioned directly. I didn't live in Denmark during the 1980s, but I have tried to understand this lived experience of racism. Why is it not said aloud? Like why is it not articulated in the language of teachers and professionals, and from the student's perspective? As I was looking through the newspapers' collections, this was such an everyday life experience for the migrant students. So, I am still struggling with what happened in the 1990s? Why did the notions of race and racism disappear? I went to the school in the 1990s, it was not a thing we talked about. So, I am very interested in the historical movement of how the term "race" got erased for some time and how it came back.

**Bontu:** I would like to add a question: Would we want this as a field, and if so, in what way? Because I think there is also a danger of institutionalizing this in an academic system that has been inherently exclusive to certain forms of knowledge and knowledge created by marginalized people. If it is institutionalized in that system, who has to have a say in how that is being done, and whose research will become part of that and seen as a part of that? So, I would love for that to be a field, but I would also be afraid of *how* it is then institutionalized in the academic system, as we have it standing right now.

## Racism research and gender studies

**Iram:** **Being at the Danish Gender Studies Conference, we are curious about the relationship between racialization and racism studies and the field of gender studies in Denmark. How has this relationship changed over time?**

**Hui:** I think it's connected to how we were schooled ourselves. When I was studying pedagogics at the University of Copenhagen, I was not really taught critical race theory, but I was taught a lot of gender studies. For me, it's how the bricks of our way of thinking build upon gender studies. It doesn't necessarily mean that it has to be like that forever, but it is very closely related in the Danish context. But now, I think, it can maybe be detached slowly. I think that also reflects if this field of ours will be developing and getting stronger by itself over time and have its own way of thinking.

**Oda-Kange:** I think gender studies, both in Denmark and in Norway and probably also a bit in Sweden, seems to be this sort of entryway if you want to do research on racism. It's easier to do it within gender studies than in other fields, in my experience. At least there you might be let in. And I think it comes from the adoption of intersectionality as a term, and then having to ask: 'Okay, where does this term come from? And can we talk about this without talking about race?' And somehow an opportunity opens. But I feel like in many other fields, you have to be careful with your words, especially in research proposals and things like that, and then maybe the truth of what you are really trying to study comes out later.

**Bontu:** I agree, it is used as an entry point for many of us because it is one of the only ways that work. At the same time, I am also always surprised and annoyed that there is still so much - not from you, but in the field of gender studies - this narrative that 'first you study gender, and then you can add another layer to it, then you can add an intersectional perspective, and then you can look at racism.' And that is often how you are allowed to do it, but it is not really the history of how that research developed. So, it's not like scholars went out and did gender research and then at some point realized: 'Oh, there is also racism, so let's look at that.' So, I am also always wondering, can we tell that story or that history in a different way of acknowledging, especially when the term intersectionality is used so much,

how that very analytical perspective comes from Black feminism and analyses of race and racism in connection with gender and in connection with class and other categories? To very actively tell that story differently to hopefully create more space and starting points for research on racism that don't have to go through gender and gender studies if that's not what's in focus of the research you are trying to do.

**Lene:** We might also ask, what has been in- and excluded through that relationship between gender studies and research on racialization and racism?

**Mira:** If we are asking what has been excluded, it has been people of color studying it. Just the fact that there has been such a huge exclusion of anyone that's not white in the field and a lot of white scholars studying non-white persons as objects or problems. That is, really, one of our biggest challenges we need to overcome. Which we are overcoming now, but I think it is one of the things that has created a lot of frustration. And then of course the term race has also been excluded from this field for a long time.

**Elizabeth:** I'm glad that you sort of opened that, Mira. Because whiteness needs to be studied more. This conference, the way I understand it, it's white gender studies. That is the default. So, what is missing is studying that invisibilized default, which is present everywhere. It is not just our panel that is on race, everything is racialized. So, we need to make that part of all the analysis we do. It's not just like Black and brown folk, who have intersectional identities, we all do. And then what about the idea of positionality? Who is allowed within the university? Who gets to teach what? Who gets to research what and research who? Who gets those jobs? Who gets to be experts? Who gets to translate who and so on? These things aren't random.

## The im/possibilities of conducting research on racialization and racism in Denmark

**Lene: Thinking about these questions of 'who is let in and who is not let in', how did you enter this field of research?**

**Ferruh:** I am not a scholar of race or immigration. What I was looking at was actually the political process that has changed in how we see immigrants in Denmark. I lived in Denmark for 20 years. When I came to Denmark, I came as a Turkish person. But when I left Denmark, I was first and foremost a Muslim. I had become Muslim. So that's the process I wanted to study. I wanted to analyze how that process had happened. I call this process culturalization. In Denmark, we used to understand the social differences in terms of class, but it became cultural differences, which then erased the class consciousness in a way. I get confused when people use the term racialization. I don't know how that fits, how that explains, what is going on in Denmark. My feeling is that it is a term that is imported from somewhere, that explains what is going on in other contexts. I am not sure how it explains it here.

**Mira:** Well, my research is on discrimination, which is discrimination on all discrimination grounds. I didn't actually intend to look at racism. I came to the field from a practical side, I worked as a consultant, advising organizations and corporations in regard to "ligestilling", which is equal opportunities, and then I realized there wasn't enough Danish research on racism in Denmark. Every time I referred to British, Swedish, whatever, other research, they were like: 'That's because we don't have a problem in Denmark.' So, if there is no research, then it's not necessary, and I was like: 'All right, I'll do the damn PhD.' So that's why I got into the field.

**Oda-Kange:** I left Denmark, actually to do my research, because I didn't feel like I could do it here. So that's where it started for me. I left Denmark

for Norway, which is in many ways two sides of the same coin or two sides of the same colonial history. But I think I needed that distance from the general denial and gaslighting that happens in Denmark every time that you try to mention coloniality or racism or anti-blackness for that matter.

**Elizabeth:** Like Oda-Kange, I also left to ask the kind of questions that I want to ask. Which is basically: How are you a minority, racialized person, when race doesn't exist, and also, how do you research something that supposedly doesn't exist? I see that a lot of the scarce research that we have in a Danish context is often some sort of discourse analysis of news media and the like, and that's already produced from somewhere. I'm really interested in hearing what real people have to say, because we can speak. And so, I am looking at some very few autobiographies and then I did a bunch of interviews to hear what people have to say. I hadn't seen that before. So as Mira said, I am also basically producing the research that I really wanted to read myself.

**Iram: What implications does the current political context have for conducting research on race and racialization?**

**Mira:** It's contentious - but interesting. I try not to get really upset. I try to see it as an interesting question, like: 'Why is that?' Because otherwise, I will do what everyone else did and leave - which is understandable, but one also has to claim this field a little bit and talk about why these challenges are there. Many have been talking about how difficult it is to work with this, and how contested it is, and how we are under attack, but that shouldn't come as a surprise, at least for most of those people who are used to being part of oppressed groups, because historically we have always been... People really get upset about this field. So, we know that this is a contentious field. And I think it's really important to claim a space in it despite that!

**Elizabeth:** Related to what Mira ended on - speaking of people being upset – is this dismissal of what we do. It's scientific research and analysis,

it's not opinions. But it gets treated like everybody can have an opinion about this, and everybody can say: 'Well, you have your individual perspective' and 'especially, you have your ethnic perspective' and 'your victimized perspective.' Whereas you have to be pretty audacious to just challenge, I don't know, a nuclear scholar in the same way and just offer your opinion like that.

**Oda-Kange:** I think that discussing how we do research in the university is already problematic, because the university itself in my eyes and in my experience, is an extremely violent place. It is not a safe place at all. You cannot be sure when teaching or sitting with colleagues having lunch, how your work will be interpreted, used, dismissed, copied, and not cited, and so on. I also want to mention all the research that has been done outside of the university, such as Farhiya Khalid with Respons and their work on the "ghettoplan" and how racism is very much connected with class and space and home in this context (see podcast "Mere end Mursten"). But at the same time, it is difficult, because once the university co-opts the knowledge that has been created outside of the university, it's only the knowledge, but not the people, that's taken in, and then it's still being narrated by an observer that stands on the outside, usually a white one. And then another thing is, as someone who has been let in, I feel like I always have to be careful not to be too honest or too activist, because there is always this fear of, 'well, now you have gone too far, and we will never let you back in.' And it becomes extremely lonely. And that means that the research that is being funded, that is actually being done, then often can only go so far. There's always a limit. It has to be "spiseligt" (digestible) for those who are funding it. It cannot be too much. It cannot be too activist. It cannot be too dangerous.

## Future visions for anti-racist change and solidarity in research and education

**Iram:** Many of you touched upon that feeling of being lonely, raising questions that can make people upset. Looking forward, what strategies for organizing solidarity can we develop? What forms of anti-racist change are we seeking in research and education? What are our visions for change?

**Mira:** We could try to remember to stand together, to support each other, and to trust in the work that we are actually doing. When you get attacked, remember we're doing research. This is not an opinion party. I think that a lot of people working in this field are extra stringent because they know they're under scrutiny in a different way than if they were studying nuclear stuff or frogs. Of course, you are all under scrutiny, but I think we are extra worried because we know there's another scrutiny. So, maybe just trust the process and not worry so much that you're not doing essentialist or positivist or quantitative research, because that is not the only research out there that is valid. And sometimes we forget that because we feel alone and feel worried and feel attacked individually. So, remembering: We are doing research. People will disagree, let them.

**Hui:** I would say that as a young scholar, it is very good to reach out for more experienced scholars who probably have been in these places and have received these attacks. And I think people working in this field are very aware of these tensions and will show solidarity and will be helpful.

**Bontu:** One question that I think a lot about, is, what does solidarity then actually mean or look like? Because it's so often also named as, 'oh yes, I stand in solidarity with the people under attack or with this field of research' and what does that really mean? I keep thinking about this open question. I don't think you can really be in solidarity as a state of being, but it's really a practice.

It's something you have to do, and you have to do it continuously. And it's this continued struggle with the people that you want to be in solidarity with, or stand with, about: 'Okay, what is it that you are actually being attacked for? Or, what kind of support do you need for that? Or, what kind of backing do we need for that?' And I don't think it means that we have to agree on everything. I don't think it means that we have to agree on exactly how this research should be done, or what questions to focus on first, but we need to have a collective aim or a collective struggle to say 'this is legitimate research'.

**Ferruh:** I am very pessimistic. There is a very sharp assault on critical thinking as such, not only on racism, as we experience within gender studies. So, I am pessimistic that we don't have power to do anything about it because they are coming after us. I don't know what to say. So, I don't know what to do. It's very stressful for a lot of us. Both here, in gender studies and some other studies too, for example, people who study the far right are also under attack.

**Bontu:** I try to remind myself quite often that, well, yes, I am marginalized in many ways and so on, but I do also hold a position in a quite renowned institution in the Global North. What do I do with that? How do I use that institutional affiliation? How do I use the resources that come with that? Thinking about very small practices: Who do I read and cite? Who do I supervise? How do I teach? What do I put in the curriculum of the courses that I teach? If I act as a reviewer, what kind of review do I give to these papers? All these small practices where we are all part of reproducing the academic system. Each and every time, I try to question myself: Am I just doing this because I somehow learned that this is how I am supposed to do it, or does that actually support that kind of academic system that I think we need to ask these questions and to do this kind of research? So, of course, quite often I can feel like, okay, I am the small PhD student in this huge academic system, and how will that change anything? But I do believe that all of us have our small leverage

points, where we can think about, who we invite, who we give a platform, etc. So, to not completely drown in the pessimism, I try to remind myself, where do I have influence and how can I use that?

**Hui:** I see myself as a descriptive researcher. I describe things. I describe these lived experiences of racialization. And then, as I study education, there are teachers and pedagogues who, I'm pretty sure, don't go into the field with the intention of discriminating. So, showing them how schooling and how their institutions are functioning, and which kind of effect it creates, and they create - without saying it's them as an individual, but the school as an institution - I think that is important. To make visible to the professional practitioners what is happening, or how these groups of students experience their teaching, I think that's important for this field.

**Mira:** We wouldn't study this if we weren't interested in equality and social justice, which are ground pillars of democracy. So, I think that's important to just say out loud: that the reason we study this and the hope we have is to contribute to strengthening equality and belonging and making it easier to be citizens in any society, and in particular the Danish society. So, I'm just pointing out, it's not entirely non-normative. It's pretty damn normative. We're trying to actually maintain our society as opposed to breaking it down. I think this work is super important in terms of supporting and not letting the democratic structure fail, basically.

**Elizabeth:** As important as I think the research is that we do, regular people don't care about academia. And politicians don't either, and they do not read our stuff, before they go public and say things about it. We aren't as important as we think. And so, something about change is actually about trying to be human as something very radical. Because it actually is very radical to stay human within academia. They certainly try to make us into some like masculinist robots or something, and so to actually practice the things that we care about, those of us that are grounded in something feminist, wherever it's from. I think that can change something for real. Like, when peers or people who are a little bit more junior to me call me crying, to be there in

a very human way. Figuring out when we can let go of that professional, academic guard. Because, of course, we needed to protect ourselves, when we are who we are, but also letting it down sometimes to show some realness. That is the thing that has kept me alive through all of these many PhD years and continues to be.

**Iram: Thank you so much to each of you for your valuable time, contribution, thoughts, reflections, for being here despite anger, despite disappointment. It means a lot. We hope that this space can also do something because it does something to gather people with different fields of work, different point of views, and different disciplinary takes on this field. Maybe we are forming some kind of field. As fluffy as it might be.**

Our aim of the roundtable was to make space for the field of research and education on racism and racialization within and in relation to gender studies and show how it is characterized by different positionalities, experiences, perspectives, and ambitions. In the discussion, it became evident that on the one hand, we cannot say there really is a demarcated field for studies on racism and racialization. Is it (the lack of) institutional backing that determines the (non-)existence of a field of racism studies? Or is it the legacy of research on racialization and racism that has been conducted in whichever field it was possible since at least the 1970s, that we should pay attention to as informally delineating a research field? If it is a field of research, how come its constitution seems fragile and influenced by broader public debates, for instance around Black Lives Matter, more than by a long-term commitment to investigate the roots of racism in Denmark? If it is not a field yet, we need to ask what risks and challenges it would comprise to institutionalize racism research within an academic system that has been inherently exclusive to knowledge created from marginalized perspectives. Looking at the relationship between gender

studies and research on racism and racialization, there have been continuous struggles of 'who is let in', who gets to study whom, and what forms of knowledge are accepted as legitimate parts of the academy. On the other hand, it also became evident in the roundtable discussion that the field, in all its diversity, is characterized by some common goals, challenges, and mechanisms. For example, the goal of being committed to analyzing and making the workings of racism and racialization evident and bringing about anti-racist change through involvement in academia, alternative knowledge production and dissemination and just staying human in restrictive and dehumanizing institutionalized structures.

The latter half of the discussion specifically turned towards the challenges of conducting research on racialization and racism, especially as a racially marginalized scholar. As the discussants highlighted, in the current political context, research insights are often treated as mere opinions, and researchers are attacked in public media discourse, political debates, as well as within universities. Academia is not a safe space for racialized scholars, and as a consequence, some scholars have had to leave Denmark to conduct their research elsewhere – in other countries, or outside the academic system – while others decide to claim their space within Danish universities despite continuous headwinds. Thus, as we ask in the headline, where to from here? If we were to try to distill a collective, collage-like answer to this question from the discussion, it might be this one: We need to recognize it as a radical act to stay human within an academy that tries to dehumanize us, to practice - and not only talk about - solidarity, which makes it possible to work towards a shared aim of strengthening social justice, equity, and belonging in this society, through our research, our teaching, and in our institutions. We hope that this roundtable can be seen as a small step in reclaiming our space and working towards a practice of solidarity.