



## ARTICLE

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# Racial embodiment and the affectivity of racism in young people's film

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**ABSTRACT** This article uses a bodily and affective perspective to explore racial minority young people's experiences of racism, as enacted (on film) through disgust and enjoyment. Applying Žižek's ideology critical psychoanalytical perspective and Kristeva's concept of "abjection", the article considers race embodied, that is the racial body both partly Real (in the Lacanian sense) and a mean for the projection of ideological meanings and discursive structures, which are sustained by specific fantasies. From this perspective, the film's affective racism is "symptomatic" of the discrepancies between, on the one hand, Danish social democratic welfare state ideology and a dominating race discourse of "equality-as-sameness", on the other, the Real of racial embodiment, which makes the encounter with the Other traumatic and obscene. The analysis exposes the bodily and affective underside of race relations (which lead attempts to discursively undo racism to fail) and instead seeks to undermine the fantasies that sustain racial power relations.

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## Introduction

When do I effectively encounter the Other “beyond the wall of language”, in the real of his or her being? Not when I am able to describe her, not when I learn her values, dreams, etc. but only when I encounter the Other in her moment of jouissance. When I discern her in a tiny detail—a compulsive gesture, an excessive facial expression, a tic—that signals the intensity of the real of jouissance. This encounter with the real is always traumatic. There is something obscene about it. (Žižek, 1998: 168)

This article analyses young people’s experiences of racism and their articulations of such experiences from a bodily and affective perspective. In Denmark, issues of racism are frequently debated in public and in politics; however, at the apparent foundation of these debates is a predominant understanding that social, political and economic welfare state politics has progressively moved society beyond the old forms of biological, juridical and structural racism that dominated Western countries during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century (Andreassen and Folke Henningsen, 2011). Moreover, in academic debates, racism is treated as primarily a discursive phenomenon based on stereotypical understandings of culture, and as an element—in society’s conversation about itself—of ideas and cognitive, categorical practices aimed at (re)producing and justifying semantic inequalities between races (Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Wetherell, 2003). While such approaches have much to offer not only as means of apprehending institutional and historical forms of racism but also as vital critiques of individualizing treatments of racism, they are less suited for capturing racism’s affective, embodied nature and ambiguous quality, and its apparent stubbornness to social change (Hook, 2004: 672).

In this article, I explore how racism is not only discursively reproduced, but also bodily and affectively enacted and experienced. To offer a window into such affective dynamics, I draw on a 4-min film titled *Racism: Go Back to Your Own Country* (henceforth *Racism*), which was co-produced in 2010 by a group of young Danish women with immigrant backgrounds and a professional film-crew during a film-research project facilitated by me. I approach race as embodied and as partly Real (in the Lacanian sense), and “not simply a reality of meaning or signification, but a holistic experiential reality of embodiment, affective and spiritual depth” (Hook, 2002: 8) beyond symbolic and verbal representation. However, in racial embodiment, the body is still a means for the projection of ideological meanings and symbolic and discursive structures.

In Denmark, such meanings and structures are reflected in the official race ideology of “equality-as sameness”, which has various socio-historical roots. Failure to acknowledge Denmark’s colonial history (Olwig, 2003) has created a national self-understanding as a mono-cultural, as opposed to a multicultural, predominantly White nation state dominated by cultural norms of unmarked Whiteness (Andreassen, 2005; Jöhncke, 2007; Myong Petersen, 2009). Furthermore, since the first half of the twentieth century, Denmark has, driven by social democratic welfare state ideology, built strong institutions to secure social and economic equality and universal (economic and juridical) rights to all citizens, across differences of class, geography, gender, race, sexuality, religion, ethnicity and so forth. Nevertheless, these universal rights—and the legitimacy of the ideology behind them—have come under pressure by recent global developments, including an increase of non-White immigrants to the country (for example, Kvist *et al.*, 2012). During the previous two decades, Denmark—along with other European countries—has witnessed strong opposition to immigration, and political parties advocating against immigration have increasingly gained a foothold (Mouritzen, 2006).

In public debates, the question of racism is most often tackled through individualization that is explained (drawing on traditional psychological approaches) as phenomena located in perceptions, attitudes and stereotypes—not only of the individual racist, but also of the victim—rather than problems of social power (Hook, 2004: 674). Thus, in allegations of racism, racism is commonly represented as an exceptional instance, existing primarily in the minds, utterances or acts of deviant individuals (Jensen *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, racism is tackled through linguistic moulding by finding new ways to talk or prevent talk about race and racism (Myong Petersen, 2009). Over the last few decades, the term “race” has vanished from the Danish language in favour of the term “ethnicity”; “racism” has been almost obliterated from legal and policy language, and has been replaced by less politically and historically loaded concepts such as “discrimination”, “unequal treatment” and “self-perceived discrimination” (Jensen *et al.*, 2010). Thus, while in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century racism (like sexism and heterosexism) lay on the very surface of discursive consciousness and could be unrepentantly stated at this level (Young, 1990a), today racial objectification is no longer condoned and a discursive commitment to equality has emerged (Young, 1990b). Collectively, Denmark suffers from what Ahmed (2012) terms “overing”, assuming that, generally, society is “over” racism (and other relations of structural inequality), with race and racism having been absorbed in the ideology of equality-as-sameness. The rather limited critical academic race research in Denmark taps into (and reinforces) a discursive and social constructivist approach to racism and its eradication (for example, Jensen *et al.*, 2010; Nielsen, 2010; Hervik and Jørgensen, 2002). However, social constructive and discursive analyses of racist phenomena may, while opening the field for political action through new discursive practices, also suffer from the same shortages as the dominant notion that by representing race differently (moulding language) racism will no longer exist.

Following Žižek (1998: 667), a discursively vanished racism will typically reoccur as “the return of the repressed”. This return takes place as a displacement of acknowledged and explicit discursive and even institutionalized forms with more insidious, oblique types of racism: “symptomatic racism”. Such racism is symptomatic in the sense that its stated reason is different from its actual cause (Hook, 2004: 684). It is symptomatic of fundamental discrepancies in the reality of racial relations beyond the inconsistencies that we may be able to represent and mould symbolically and discursively. In other words, answering the “hows” and “whys” of symptomatic racism cannot be done by looking at discursive dynamics at play, but must be done by looking at dynamics that operate in the ontological domain that precedes—and exists in opposition to—the realm of language and the “symbolic” (Oliver, 1993 in Hook, 2004). Here, we may find the publicly *unacknowledged* “obscene” supplement—the affective underside—of our Danish race ideology of equality-as-sameness.

In the film *Racism*, we are offered a window into such affective dynamics that reflect not only a certain discursive racism and the fantasies that sustain it, but, more importantly, the unofficial affective underside of this racism (which escapes attempts at becoming discursively undone) and the fantasies that feed these affects. However, while analyses of the affective constitution of racism tend to focus on fear and hatred (for example, Clarke, 2003), I point to the role of enjoyment in the disgust felt by both the offender and the offended in the racist encounter. Illuminating the enjoyable affects related to experiences of racism not only broadens our understanding of affective dynamics in race formations, but also problematizes the common notion that, in racist encounters, there are clearly distinguishable roles of violators and victims, and thus grapples with both the individual

racist's investment in his or her own racist subjectivity (Hook, 2004: 672) and, more importantly, the victim's investment in being a victim of racism. To unfold the dynamics of racial embodiment and affective racism, and the ideological and fantasmatic qualities of such racism, I watch the film through Slavoj Žižek's ideology critical and psychoanalytical perspective (Žižek, 1989, 1992, 1997, 1998, 2006). In exploring dynamics of bodily and affective inclusion and exclusion in racial encounters, I apply the concepts of disgust and abjection (Kristeva, 1982; Ahmed, 2004; Hook, 2004) and social abjection (Tyler, 2013).

### Film context and analysis

*Racism*,<sup>1</sup> a 1-min fiction (part of an 8.5-min film in three parts) shows the confrontation of two racial minority young women with a majority Danish White mother and her young daughter in a street of Nørrebro, a racially diverse borough of Copenhagen. The three film producers were friends, all born and raised in Nørrebro, with parents from Bosnia, Lebanon and Iraq. They had been recruited at their local school (that had about 40 per cent minority students), spoke fluent Danish, did well in school and were active in organized leisure activities; these characteristics are dominating political norms for "integrated" minority youth.

I initiated the film project as part of a research project studying "social cohesion and ethnic diversity" in Copenhagen, in which I asked the young people to make films about youth life in a multiracial neighbourhood (see [http://www.sfi.dk/soced\\_partners-12588.aspx](http://www.sfi.dk/soced_partners-12588.aspx)). The film workshop, run by professional film producers and myself, consisted of 2 weeks of sessions in pitching, scripting, acting, directing, shooting and film watching and discussion. During 6 weeks of shooting (which I followed and recorded), the young producers were supervised by a mentor who actively gave suggestions for storyline, scenes and shooting techniques, and an editor who made choices of scenes, sequences and cuts, which eventually influenced the film's dramatic curves and plots. Thus, while young women were permitted to voice their perspectives as scriptwriters and producers, *Racism*—like most other films—became a collaborative product (Banks, 2001; MacDougal, 2006; Rose, 2012). The following analysis therefore treats the film as a cultural product that while staging the issue of racism within the film media's dramatizing form and language and hereby potentially accentuating conflictual aspects of everyday life experiences draws on collective narratives and fantasies that emanate from shared political and ideological conditions. In this way the film serves as a window into the ways in which dynamics around race relations and racism are not only experienced, but also performed and narrated by racial minority youth: dynamics that all make up the affective economy of racialization and "racism".

The strength of visual media such as film is in its ability to communicate non-verbally through sensual and affective expressions, and to evoke audience perceptions and multisensory reactions in various registers, including the conscious and unconscious, the cognitive and emotional and the sensual and pre-reflexive (Spencer, 2011: 32). Besides, operating also in the Imaginary order of social reality, film invites not only to analytical interpretations and audience gazes, but also to fantasmatic (Žižek, 1992). To embrace these different registers of meaning, I analyse the film on three parallel levels: the storyline and dialogue; the non-verbal (bodily and facial expressions and tone of voice); and the moods of expression (Grady, 2001) through various compositional elements (including genre, picture content, spatial organization and point of view) (Rose, 2012).

### The real of racial embodiment

Following Žižek, when we make symbolic and discursive representations of social phenomena, something is always lacking;

as Lacan (2006 [1964]: 848) writes, "the letter kills". What we lack are representations of the Real (Žižek, 1989: 123, 1997: 82). In my analysis of *Racism*, I suggest that this Real is race and racial embodiment. Much as the social order is never complete, the human subject is a split structure, never complete or unified unto itself. This incommensurability also concerns embodiment—what Hook (2002: 2) terms the "dilemma of embodiment". Thus, there is a split between symbolic representations of the body and experiences of how the body works as a physical and material vehicle for subjectivization, through which racialized individuals make sense of their being in the world (Knowles, 2003). In this dilemma, the body, itself, becomes the means for the projection of ideological meanings, corporally playing our symbolic dilemmas (Hook, 2002: 5). The body, then, is not merely a socially constructed object that may be captured through discursive contextualizations, but partly Real (in the Lacanian sense); that is, it eludes the closure of the symbolic and irresolvable to discursive and other social-symbolic representations, reflecting "the impossibility of the symbolic [and the subject] fully to 'become itself'" (Žižek, 2000: 120). Race is, in this sense, "not simply a reality of meaning or signification, but a holistic experiential reality of embodiment, affective and spiritual depth" (Hook, 2002: 8).

Paradoxically, the Real of racial embodiment disturbs our social-symbolic constructions both by revealing the inability of the Symbolic to fully represent race and by *manifesting* itself in relation to the Symbolic exactly by revealing this inability (Žižek, 1989: 123, 1997: 82). Manifestations of the Real of racial embodiment may take different forms, as something pre-linguistic (that is, unavailable to language) that inherently "opposes symbolization" (Žižek, 1989: 169) but, at the same time, offers something more than the Symbolic can (Rösing, 2007: 30). In this manifestation, racial embodiment constitutes a surplus of meaning that discourse cannot embrace or positively identify, which leaves discursive representations insufficient. Alternatively, racial embodiment takes form as an undifferentiated matter of being—an amorphous substance that only enters into form, being and meaning through symbolic representation (language); however, at the same time, it is blocked from our immediate access in the Symbolic, in language (Bjerg, 2008: 16). This suggests that racial embodiment as a sensation of the phenomenology or materiality of, for instance, skin colour, cannot, however, be accessed or understood unless discursively "translated" into language about race and racial differences, attributes and identities.

Finally, the Real of racial embodiment may appear as the "parallax Real"—that is, in the *distance* between different representations of race that is also projected to the racialized subject and body (Žižek, 2006: 26). In this form, the Real of racial embodiment dissolves all forms of essence or identity into a multitude of incongruous representations, such as the different discrepant discursive representations that have emerged throughout Danish (and Western) history, which are still part of collective repertoires for understanding and symbolizing race. This parallax Real of racial embodiment represents neither the unity nor the dissolution of perspectives on race, but is a manifestation of the traumatic kernel of race that hinders its symbolization (Žižek, 2006: 26), which, nevertheless, obtains effect through the production of endless symbolizations to overcome these discrepancies.

In the Danish context, I trace three discourses of race (generally phrased in terms of ethnicity) that define what race is, how it works, and whether, how and why racism takes place. First, the traditional race theory, which we have now moved beyond (Koch, 2000, 2004; Andreassen and Folke Henningsen, 2011), which essentializes and hierarchizes (biological, cultural and physical) differences between races. Second, the multicultural discourse that has never really gained political foothold in

Denmark (Hedetoft, 2006b, 2011), which essentializes cultural differences between races but equalizes them socially in terms of power, rights and so forth. Third, a specific Nordic race discourse that essentializes sameness and considers racial sameness the basis of social equality (for instance, in power and rights). Thus, on the one hand, racial equality (rather than hierarchy) is embraced together with, on the other, racial sameness (rather than differences), to generate a race discourse of equality-as-sameness (Gullestad, 1992; Hedetoft, 2006a, b; Jöhncke, 2007). This discourse is rooted in the ideological notion that the Danish welfare state's equalizing distribution of goods and Denmark's long national history as a liberal democratic and culturally, ethnically, religiously and socially homogeneous country has made races equal and, consequently, society does not (systematically) produce racism or racists.

However, as shown by Gullestad (1992) in relation to Norwegian cultural norms of social relations, both the ideal of equality and the conformity of seeking sameness in social relations—resulting in an ideology of equality-as-sameness—is sustained by cultural practices of avoiding (the uneasiness provoked by) the proximity of (for example) class, racial and gender differences and different Others. Such proximity is managed through symbolic (and physical) fences and distance. In the following analysis I show how fantasies that sustain the ideology of equality-as-sameness are punctured when—as portrayed in the film—cultural norms (also prevalent in Denmark) of proximity versus distance (in regard to social differences) are transgressed, and how such transgressions generate racism. Now let us turn to the film.

### Film content and storyline

In *Racism*, we meet two parties—two young women with immigrant backgrounds and a White mother with her young daughter (about 5 years old)—each involved in an intimate and emotional interaction. The underscoring—a light solo string backed up by deeper vibrating strings—sets an intense atmosphere of suspense and alertness. The location is an ordinary street of Nørrebro with people, bikes and cars passing; the scene is an apparently everyday afternoon. We first follow the two young women, Carla and her friend, in a close-up from behind, as they chat and tease each other about some boy, Hussain, while shambling along with dangling arms, pushing each other by the shoulders as they stroll down the pavement. The camera takes the young women's point of view as we see a White mother and her small daughter approach. This is followed by a close-up of the young women *en face*, showing the intimacy and emotionality of their interaction, with Carla shyly pushing her friend when asked about Hussain. The camera shifts to a close-up of the White mother and daughter, hand in hand, chatting cheerfully about the daughter having had too much candy, and dancily pulling each other's arms. The camera shifts its point of view back and forth between the young women and the White mother and daughter until the two parties pass each other and one of the young women, teasingly pushed by her friend, stumbles over the daughter.

The White mother instantly turns towards the young women and aggressively asks: "What the fuck are you doing? You don't bump into my daughter like that!" Carla turns towards the White mother, backs away a few steps and raises her hands defensively. In an apologetic voice she replies: "Easy, it wasn't on purpose". The White mother, while continuing to walk away from the young women, turns back to them and hisses: "Go back to your own country, won't you? ... so we can get rid of you". "Say again?" Carla replies in an offensive voice, and steps towards the White mother with an aggressive bodily posture; however, she is held back by her friend. The White mother moves a few steps

away, then stops, turns her body towards the young women again and asks condescendingly: "Haven't your parents taught you to behave properly?" Carla rapidly steps towards the White mother and faces the camera in an intense, almost blurred, close-up, asking, "What have my parents got to do with this?" The White mother steps towards Carla and repeats her question in a more intense, low voice. In this new clash, the camera follows the turbulent movements of the characters. The White mother again angrily accuses Carla of getting too close to her daughter. Carla—once more approaching aggressively—replicates, "Go away yourself". The White mother now takes a firmer hold of her daughter's hand: "Yes, let's get away. Come on, baby". She turns to leave the scene, but makes a return, hisses in an intense, repressed voice, "Fucking, Paki". Carla is held back by her friend, who calms her down by saying "Carla, forget it". As the two young women also turn to leave the scene, Carla makes a grimace, waves her hand and shouts in a sarcastic, condescending yet triumphant voice, "Bye-bye, racist Dane".

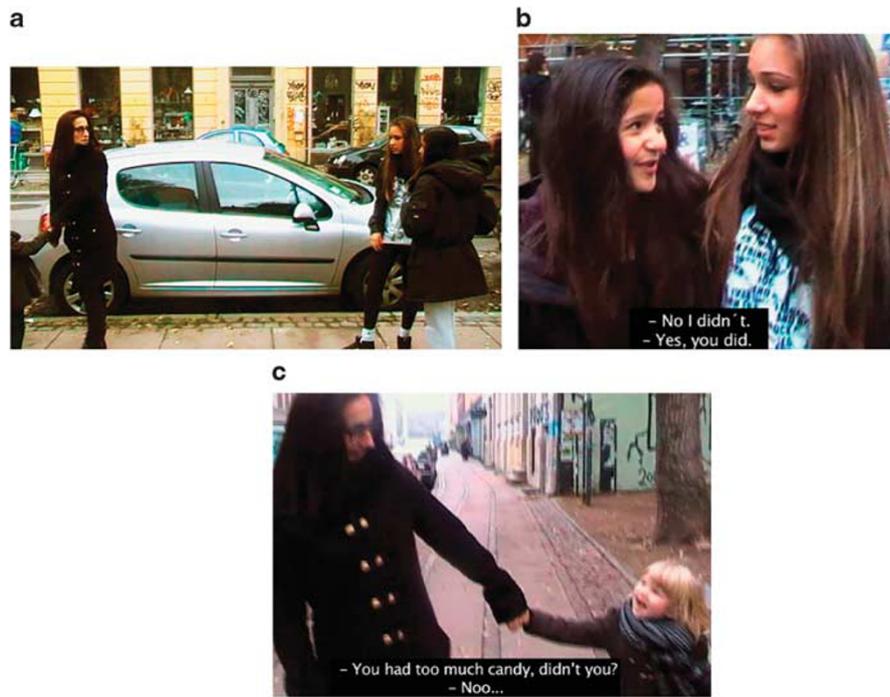
This scene spells out an everyday, initially innocent situation that step-by-step builds into a racist confrontation, with the derogatory (racist) intentions of the White mother stated in the final line, "Fucking, Paki", which provokes Carla to finalize the scene and conclude these intentions by shouting "Bye-bye, racist Dane"! Furthermore, the moral of the story appears to be that racial minority young people experience verbal attacks on their racial background from the White majority as part of everyday experience. The positions in this encounter are clearly distributed, with the White mother in the role of the racist aggressive offender and the racial minority young women in the roles of the self-defending victims. Thus, racism is depicted as the enactment of verbal aggression by the majority White against minority non-White people, reproducing a hierarchy of races (which, in the film, is corroborated by the adult-youngster asymmetry).

When interpreted at the symbolic level, the film presents a critique of the dominant notion that, in Denmark, we are "over" racism. This notion is strongly supported by the race discourse of equality-as-sameness. Moreover, the storyline implicitly reproduces the idea that exposing the ways in which racism works discursively provides the opportunity for this racism to be politically undone; to change the way we talk about and treat race. However, if we look closer at the affective dynamics of the scene, we may discover that the enactment and experience of racism in the film is much more ambivalent.

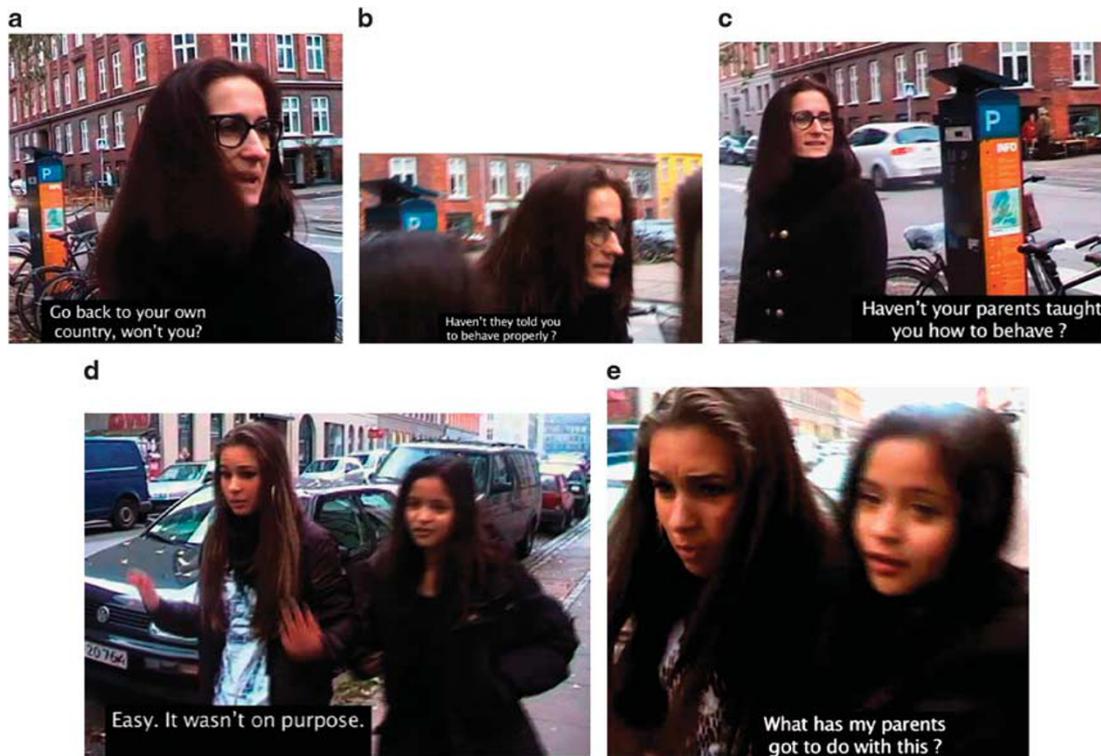
### Sensing affective racism

To get a sense of the affective dynamics in *Racism*, let us turn our attention to the movement of bodies, gestures of faces and intonation of voices (following the speech) in the film. We will start from the opening (and determining) act, in which Carla's body movement suddenly brings her into a confrontation with the White mother and daughter. The sudden closeness creates a rupture in the intimacies of both the White mother and daughter and Carla and her friend—intimacies filled with joy, smiles and signs of interconnectedness (Fig. 1(a)–(c)).

The rupture makes the White mother react affectively in ways that directly show in her bodily and facial gestures (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995). She first reacts with surprise (her body almost jumping back, her eyebrows lifting), then anger (shown in her tense tone of voice), then contempt–disgust (her lifted upper lip and chin pulled away looking long, intimidatingly and down at Carla while she bows over and imposes her body close to Carla's, spelling out her words in a slow, intensified and condescending voice). Carla's affective reactions appear to mirror the White mother's; however, Carla's reactions move from defensiveness to offensiveness during the course of the interaction (Fig. 2(a)–(e)).



**Figure 1 | The encounter between two racial minority young women and a white mother and daughter. (a) The scenery; (b) The young women's intimacy and joy: teasing about a boy; (c) The mother's and daughter's intimacy and joy: teasing about candy. Note: These film stills are reproduced from "Racism: Go back to your own country" with permission.**



**Figure 2 | Building up the conflict. (a) The white mother in surprise and anger; (b) The white mother bodily intensifying the conflict; (c) The white mother showing contempt and disgust; (d) The young women's defensiveness; (e) The young women's offensiveness. Note: These film stills are reproduced from "Racism: Go back to your own country" with permission.**

As part of these affective responses, some dancing back and forth—with the parties pulled to and from each other in turn—takes place. There is a dance of alternatingly getting (too) close, transgressing the intimate borders of the bodily integrity of the

other and aggressively distancing one's self from the other. The White mother turns her back to the young women more than once to walk away, but then returns, as if to escalate the emotional intensity of the situation, accelerating her own affective

investment and Carla's affective reaction. What is the meaning of this pulling towards and away from each other? Why do the opponents not just leave the scene? Because, I suggest, the racist confrontation in the film exemplifies an encounter with the Other in the Real of racial embodiment—an encounter that we are unable to realize and must therefore escape from, but to which we also feel deeply attracted. The racism portrayed in the film is a piece of the Real—racism that is symptomatic of the traumatic kernel of race and racial embodiment. Let me unravel this line of thinking by looking first at disgust and abjection, then fantasy and enjoyment, in this encounter of racism.

### Disgust and abjection

First, the affective ambivalence in this encounter, revealing both disgust and some attraction, may be conceptualized as “abjection” (Kristeva, 1982; Hook, 2004; Tyler, 2006, 2013). Abjection is—at the level of the individual—concerned with the borders of the subject, the boundaries of one's identity and how such boundary lines are disrupted, unsettled and made disturbingly permeable. To experience abjection is to feel horror or disgust as a kind of “border anxiety”, an urgent response that arises to separate one's self from a potentially overwhelming or contaminating external quality or entity (Hook, 2004: 684). The “abject” is taken to be the source of such affects—an uncontained and indefinable “thing” that elicits fear, dread, anxiety and disgust (Young, 1990a: 207). Disgust, in itself, is a spatially aversive affect: when we are disgusted, we flee from the “perceptual neighbourhood” of the revolting thing or person and from possible intimate contact or union with it (Tyler, 2013: 22). Thus, in *Racism*, the dance of bodies to and from each other may testify to the White mother's disgust, which was her unconsciousness and spontaneous reaction provoked by the sudden threatening closeness of Carla (when she stumbled towards her), and her “flight from” this closeness.

However, disgust is deeply ambivalent, and also involves desire for or attraction to the very objects we feel repellent towards (Ahmed, 2004: 88). While disgust pulls us away from an object—a pull that feels almost involuntary, as if our bodies are thinking for us or on behalf of us—desire, in contrast, pulls us towards objects and opens us to the bodies of others. This pulling is an intensification of movement—in which the objects seem to have us “in their grip”—and requires us to pull away (Ahmed, 2004: 84). Disgust thus involves not simply distanciation (reconciliation), but the intensification of bodily contact that “disturbs” the skin with the possibility of desire (Ahmed, 2004: 88).

Understood as abjection, the encounter of Carla and the White mother becomes an operation of repulsion, expulsion, ejection and denigration (Butler, 1993), not only as sentiment, but also as action (Hook, 2004: 686). The White mother acts by verbally, symbolically and affectively expelling the young women (saying “Go back to your own country”); ejecting them (trying to physically distance herself and show bodily loathing); and denigrating them (by impugning their motives and disqualifying their parents as parents). This latter impulse shows how disgust may also transform into and be expressed as morality (Kolnai (1929) in Korsmeyer and Smith (2004)). “Moral disgust” emerges through an “associative transference between physically and morally repulsive reactions” (Tyler, 2013: 22), as shown in the White mother's slide from physical disgust (provoked by the young women's bodily intrusion) into contempt and judgement of values. This slide illustrates the social, relational and cultural aspects of disgust, functioning to affirm the boundaries of the social body through (actual and symbolic) expulsions of what we collectively agree to be pollution objects, practices or persons

(Douglas, 1966). Disgust reactions are always contingent and relational, and reveal less about the disgusted individual or the thing deemed disgusting than about the culture in which disgust is experienced and performed (Tyler, 2013: 23).

Thus, abjection refers not only to the constitution of human subjectivity through differentiation and separation (Kristeva, 1982: 2), but also to collective dynamics of racial subject formation and exclusion (Butler, 1993: 3). The abject is a threat to the coherence of the symbolic of race relations (that is, larger social and linguistic structuring systems of laws, symbols, prohibitions and meanings) (Hook, 2004), and abjection is that which “the symbolic must reject, cover over and contain” (Gross, 1990: 89). Thus, abjection in the racist encounter in *Racism* may be seen as a manifestation of the publicly unacknowledged “obscene” supplement of the Danish ideology of equality-as-sameness.

### Racism as fantasy and enjoyment

Second, in Žižek's social reality, in which the symbolic, discursively produced race formations are continuously disturbed by the Real, inescapable inscrutability of racial embodiment, a healing of this discrepancy takes place in the Imaginary (Žižek, 2000: 120). The Imaginary is the layer of reality (which film also displays) in which dreams, hopes, ideology and fantasies are produced to make the social world appear coherent. According to Žižek, we need—and therefore desire—a sense of coherence and completeness to be able (as subjects and society) to act socially. Thus, desire is a central driving force in “healing” the gap between the symbolic and the Real, and in the subject's inscription into ideology (Žižek, 1989: 3; Bjerg, 2008: 21). With the help of fantasy, we sustain a “public ‘official’ ideological texture” (Žižek, 1998: 159); for example, an ideology of race relations apparently overcomes the discrepancies between our symbolic representations and the disturbing Real of racial embodiment. What fantasies do the young filmmakers produce in *Racism* and how do these fantasies sustain the Danish ideology of equality-as-sameness?

One fantasy sustaining equality-as-sameness (the idea that “we” are the same as the “Other” and that racial differences do not essentially exist but are conceived through a historical heritage of racial inequality that we have now realized is wrong) might be that if we make the Other the same as us, we will be able to fully embrace and love the Other (as one of our own). Such a fantasy works to conceal the reality of our ambivalent relationship with the Other: the reality of racial relations, which, following Gullestad (1992), are structured through a social contract for physically avoiding the Other that is avoiding the Real of embodied difference. In a Lacanian perspective, our relationship with the Other is formed by, on the one hand, our close draw to the Other, to the extent that we not only desire the Other, but we also desire the Other's desire for us (Žižek, 1989). On the other hand, we cannot bear the closeness of the Other, because such closeness threatens to reveal that (due to the intrusion of the Real) the Other is never able to accommodate our desire for the Other's desire, love, closeness and sublime wholeness. As Žižek (1998: 163) puts it: “Do we not encounter here, in this [...] very intrusive overpromixity, the horrifying weight of the encounter of a neighbor in the real of her presence? Love thy neighbor ... no thanks!” This is a reflection of the Danish (or Nordic) discomfort of physical and symbolic proximity of difference. To bear this traumatic paradox, we need fantasy “to fill the opening in the Other, to conceal its inconsistency” (Žižek, 1989: 123). Thus, we thrive in the longing for closeness, because it preserves the fantasmatic illusion that the Other represents the key to our sublime wholeness. In the fantasy sustaining Danish ideology about the Other being the same and therefore lovable, we stay



**Figure 3 | Defeat and triumph. (a) The young women's intrusiveness and enjoyment; (b) The young women exposing surplus enjoyment; (c) The white mother staged as a racist; (d) Concluding the scene triumphantly: this is racism!**

**Note:** These film stills are reproduced from "Racism: Go back to your own country" with permission.

protected from the truth that the Other cannot give or steal from us the total love (or stable, unquestioned identity that such love will bring us) that neither he, she, nor we, possess (Žižek, 1993: 203–205).

Following this line of thinking, in this paradoxical encounter with the Other—driven by an unfulfilled longing for closeness—a “surplus enjoyment” (Lacan’s “jouissance”) is produced. This “more-than” pleasure emerges in the pain caused by the lack of fulfillment from and wholeness with the Other. Pain generates enjoyment via a magic “reversal-into-itself”, by means of our facial and bodily expressions of pain (like shame caused by humiliation) (Žižek, 1998: 156). In *Racism*, the characters are confronted with the disgust that the transgressing closeness with the Other causes in them. Seen through this lens, *Racism* not only displays the producers’ loss of love, but also the very essence of their experience of racism.

Moreover, the film publicly laments such loss of love, which gives rise to a pleasure of its own (Žižek, 1998: 156). The film, in this way, articulates the “paradoxical jouissance as the payment that the exploited—the servant—gets for his serving the Master” (Žižek, 1998: 156). Watching the film closely reveals how Carla’s friend smiles several times during the confrontation with the White mother. These smiles apparently seem like illogical affective impulses, which nonetheless illustrate the surplus enjoyment generated (via its magic reversal-into-itself) by the pain and humiliation caused by the White mother’s verbal assault of the young women (Fig. 3(a)–(d)).

In other words, the film shows how the racially minority youth found enjoyment in not only the *pain* caused by the White woman’s hostility, but also in *exposing* the pain caused by such a loss of love by the racial majority Other. Enjoyment may, however, have also driven the White mother’s condemnation of Carla and her friend as a way for her to rid herself of disgust by projecting it towards the Other. The encounter between racialized bodies may, in this way, have represented a somewhat legitimate

site of violence, in which the White mother could be “safely” aggressive.

The film’s other fantasy, which also sustains the race ideology of equality-as-sameness, is that we overcome racism by “talking it away”. This fantasy asserts that if we think and talk about the Other as if he or she is the same as (and therefore equal to) us, racism will disappear. Likewise, if we do not speak about or speak differently about racism, it will vanish. The historical change in contemporary liberal societies towards discursive commitments to equality (Young, 1990b) has brought with it new taboos of race. Not only have symbolic markings of racial differences and hierarchies become illegitimate, but racism, itself, has become a taboo. Such taboos both spring from the official ideological script about racial equality-as-sameness and are based, at a deeper level, in the fantasmatic illusion about our love for the Other. Taboos call for transgressions, as transgressions mark subjects’ resistance to absorption into ideology (while simultaneously legitimating ideology). In *Racism*, the taboo of racism is transgressed. Thus, the film facilitates a situation that legitimately stages the White mother as a racist in a storyline that calls for, and indeed requires, the racial minority young women to call her a racist.

Thus, designing a scene in which the racial minority may justifiably accuse the White majority of racism facilitates the release of both parties’ defenses and survival senses and displays their true, paradoxical desire for and estrangement from each other (Žižek, 1998: 160). Moreover, the audience is invited to yield to their fantasmatic kernel of *jouissance*—their surplus enjoyment (Žižek, 1998: 169).

### Unveiling symptomatic racism

*Racism* draws our attention to the ways in which dominant modern discourses and ideologies of race position racially minority young people as “social objects” (Tyler, 2013). From a structural perspective, these people are cast as a waste population

that threatens national borders of racial identities from within. At the same time, the racial Other constitutes a surplus that the system requires both to constitute the boundaries of the nation state and to legitimize the prevailing order of racial power (Bataille in Tyler, 2013). The borders that are drawn and reinstated in the confrontation between the White mother and the racial minority young women are the borders of the nation state (as stated in the line “Go back to your own country”) with reference to race (as stated in the line “fucking, Paki”). The confrontation exemplifies the bordering of White privilege to Danish territory.

The confrontation, however, also exemplifies the limitations of the ideology of equality-as-sameness; more precisely, it illustrates the disturbing breakthrough of the Real of racial embodiment into the Symbolic interchange of races in actual personal encounters. In the Nordic context, where social relations are structured to avoid closeness with the different Other, maintaining the ideology of being not only equal, but also the same, bodily confrontations and closeness *with* the different Other are transgressions of the (bodily and symbolic) fences that sustain such an ideology. The confrontation thus illustrates the ways in which borders of national ideologies of race are policed at the micro-level in daily interaction—not only discursively, but also affectively, through both bodily enactments of prohibitions (for example, of closeness) and transgressions of these same prohibitions (for example, accelerations of the bodily and emotional intensity of this closeness).

Moreover, the film exposes how it feels to be situated in the position of the abject, and how this position is continuously re-enacted through the interplay of ambivalent bodily and affective dynamics that revolve around enjoyment and disgust. Enjoyment and disgust interchange between the parties in the racist encounter, revealing both enjoyment in the disgust they meet from the Other and disgust that they show the Other in return. This encounter is a moment with the Other “in the Real of her *jouissance*” (Žižek, 1998: 168)—in the intensity of the Real of racial embodiment going beyond the public official ideological script of race into its unacknowledged supplement. Such an encounter with the Real is always traumatic: “there is something obscene about it” (Žižek, 1998: 168). However, without this Real of *jouissance*, we ultimately cannot relate to or interact with the Other, as she would otherwise remain a fiction—a purely symbolic subject of strategic reasoning. As such, the kernel of Otherness resides in the regulation of his or her *jouissance* (Žižek, 1998: 169).

In this obscene encounter, racism becomes a symptom of the Real of racial embodiment. However, simultaneously, at another level, the racial Other—being different, disgusting and anxiety provoking—becomes a symptom in the form of a projection of that which prevents the realization of the Danish fantasy of all races being the same and equal—the ideological illusion on which we build our national identity as liberal and tolerant. As a symptom, the Other deprives the Danish community of an object of enjoyment—namely, the fantasy of loving the Other as we love ourselves. However, we cannot get rid of the symptom, as it is not an isolated defect or deviation from the norm, but a recurrent systematic error that functions as the fantasmatic protection of the fundamental gap around which the Symbolic is constituted (Žižek, 1989: 78). If the mother succeeds in expelling Carla, making her go back to her own country, she would have to crush the fantasy and realize that the sameness, and the love that it promises (upon which Danish cultural identity is founded), is a fiction—an impossibility. She must realize that not only do we not love Others who are the same, but also we desire not to be equal with them.

In the politics of race, the symptom through which the impossible fantasy of equality-as-sameness is veiled is the precondition

for the Symbolic to function at all. If we were to fully realize that symptoms—as they manifest in individual racial Others (like Carla and the White mother) or in symptomatic bodily affective–abjective racism—are not just isolated limitations or deviations from the functioning of the social reality, the Symbolic falls apart. Thus, we need fantasy despite, and by virtue of, the grip, it has on us. To undermine this grip of fantasy, we can, as I have tried to do in the analysis of *Racism* expose the fantasies that sustain the racial power relations. Such power relations rely on an obscene supplement—for instance the ambivalent affectivity of abjection, disgust and enjoyment—which sustains it only as long as this supplement remains in the shadow.

Adapting an ideology critical psychoanalytical perspective for an analysis of racism as portrayed by the young producers provides the opportunity to explore not only the dynamics of racial embodiment and affective “racisms” uncanny logic of return, but also the micro–macro dialectics of such dynamics. Analysing the micro dynamics of *Racism*, illuminates the current political macro dynamics of apparently growing levels of intolerance, hostility and hatred towards and from racial minorities in liberal societies (such as Denmark, the Nordic and others Western countries), in which equality and democracy have become enshrined political ideals (Žižek, 1998: 677). Thus, *Racism* shows how—in a climate of “equality”—displacements take place through collective affective and subjective bodily dynamics that transforms overt racism from being socially unpalatable to becoming inwardly permissible (Hook, 2004: 683). Such insights may enable us as society to grasp—maybe even for youth practitioners to grapple with—racial minority youths ambivalent affective relations with majority society. This may be achieved by acknowledging the subconscious and bodily nature of not only racial minority youths experiences of alienation and the practices of re/abjection by both racial minorities and majority society, but also the mutual affective investments and profits from engaging such social interactions and bodily affective transactions.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

- 1 The article may be read without watching the film, but for interested readers the film is found here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iiidgm\\_VeEs&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iiidgm_VeEs&feature=youtu.be).
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