Abstract

This article analyses how young marginalized ethnic minority men in Denmark react to the othering they are subject to in the media as well as in the social arenas of everyday life. The article is based on theoretically informed ethnographic fieldwork among such young men as well as interviews and other types of material. Taking the concepts of othering, intersectionality and marginality as point of departure the article analyses how these young men experience othering and how they react to it. One type of reaction, described as stylization, relies on accentuating the latently positive symbolic meaning in the subject position of the black man in order to become dangerous and sexy. Another type of reaction is resistance, which may take the form of inarticulate oppositional behaviour often aimed at female welfare state professionals or more articulate ‘street politics’ making the margin a site of critique although in a masculinist way. These reactions to othering represent a challenge to researchers interested in intersectionality and gender, because gender is reproduced as a hierarchical form of social differentiation at the same time as racism is both reproduced and resisted.

Keywords
Othering, marginality, intersectionality, race, gender, resistance, everyday life, masculinity, hip hop
Masculinity at the margins

– othering, marginality and resistance among young marginalized ethnic minority men

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Introduction

So Called “immigrants” take up a lot of space in Danish mass media discourses as well as in everyday talk among ethnic Danes (Horst 1991, Røgilds 1994, 2002, Diken 1998, Hervik 1999, Yilmaz 1999, Thomsen 2006). Commentators have characterized Danish discourses about “immigrants” as an example of ‘new racism’ based on a logic of cultural difference (Schierup 1993). Hence Hervik (2004) describes the popular discourse of most Danes as characterised by a culturalist dichotomy between “we” and “they” implying that ‘cultural difference is beyond questioning and regarded as insurmountable’ (256). Furthermore the alleged culture of the “immigrants” is devalued. For instance “immigrants” are routinely depicted as exploiting society, dirty and bad-tempered in relation to ethnic Danes, who contribute to society, are clean and calm (Hervik 2004, 254). Some of these discourses address young “immigrant” men; especially marginalized young “immigrant” men who mass media construct as a burden or a threat to society. In the words of Andreassen they are often described as criminal and ‘as members of gangs, as irredeemable, and as inhabitants of lawless areas’ (2005, 122). Sexuality is also present in these discourses as these men are often portrayed as ‘sexually aggressive and as potential sexual threats’ (2005, 191, also Andreassen 2006).

In fact most of these young men are not “immigrants” as many were born in Denmark and did not migrate. I will here use the term visible ethnic minorities thereby acknowledging the importance of bodily racial markers.1

Discourses have a tendency to disseminate through society and influence the social logics of everyday life. However, relatively little is known about how the discursive constructions of these young men, in the media as well as in concrete social arenas, affect their everyday lives and how they react to it. In other words there is little research on how the positioning of these young men as the other creates a specific set of challenges, possibilities and conditions for them, i.e. how discursive othering makes up a specific site of agency. Likewise, relatively little attention has been devoted to analysing how the working through or answering of the situation of these young men is specifically gendered.
The aim of this article is to analyse processes of gendered agency in relation to othering. I will show how a specific form of otherness is produced in everyday life and how these young men work through this otherness in a gendered way, by producing a style which makes them appear both dangerous and sexy, while they simultaneously resist some dimensions of racism and othering. I will also show how marginality cannot be reduced to a situation of despair and disempowerment, as the margin can be a site of resistance.

The rest of the article consists of six sections. The first section presents methods and sample; section two the theoretical concepts. Section three moves on to the empirical field and shows how othering takes place in everyday life. Sections four and five focus on reactions to othering in everyday life and on the margin as a site of resistance. I conclude in section six by discussing how the specific situation of these young men results in specific forms of gendered agency.

Methods and sample

Empirically I draw on ethnographic data generated during my PhD project (Jensen 2007). The fieldwork took place in three youth clubs and a social project for excluded youths, in three Danish cities. Fieldwork was carried out from May 2001 to November 2005. A total of 126 observations were conducted. I strived to practice what Staunæs refers to as ‘deep hanging out’ (2004, 75–77), i.e. being present and following the rhythm of the field while trying to grasp its deeper structuring logics. At the same time my ethnographic study has been theoretically informed (Willis 1997). In addition to informal conversations, a total of 23 young men aged 15–25 were interviewed in 18 taped semi-structured qualitative interviews. I also draw on material from magazines, music as well as internet ethnography, so that my empirical material makes up what Löfgren refers to as an ‘empirical bricolage’ (1987).

The youth clubs and the social project were chosen because of their locality and/or their social work with young people. Two were ordinary Danish youth clubs (one attended May–December 2001 and September 2003, the other October–November 2005), another an youth club assigned a special role in work with troubled visible ethnic minority youth (attended April 2004–September 2005) and the last a social project working with marginalized young people offering an alternative way to finish school (attended October 2003 to April 2004). The young men I interviewed and/or focused on in my fieldwork were marginalized in terms of different dimensions: Many had problems with school; most were considered by social workers to have social problems; many were criminalized ranging from shoplifting (most) to robbery (a few). Of the oldest men in the sample most had problems finding work/apprenticeships and all had parents who were on the margin of the labour market: some unemployed; some in low wage employment; a few running
small barely profitable one-family businesses. They young men had different visible ethnic minority backgrounds, with parents from Somalia, Turkey, Kurdistan, Palestine, Iran, Pakistan, Ex-Yugoslavia, Iraq, Ghana, Gambia and other national contexts. Most lived in deprived areas of the urban periphery, characterized by simultaneous classed and ethnic marginality.

Analytical tools

I use a number of theoretical concepts as tools for analysing my empirical material: The concept of othering was originally coined by Spivak in her essay *The Rani of Sirmur* (1985). The concept draws on a wide range of inspirations, such as feminist (de Beauvoir 1947) and postcolonialist (Said 1978) thinking, now somewhat overlapping although at the time of coining the term separate theoretical strands. The concept is used to describe how less powerful groups – in this case a numerical minority – are constructed as the other – deviant, strange, pathological, uncivilized – in order to stabilize the self of the centre – Western, male, middle class – as normal, rational, healthy and civilized. In other words the group which is defined into existence, and thereby at the same time offered and relegated to a specific subject position, is described as ‘morally and/or intellectually inferior’ (Schwalbe et al 2000, 423). Such processes of othering are tightly related to power in the sense that othering is a ‘process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line is drawn between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – between the more and the less powerful – and through which social distance is established and maintained’ (Lister 2004, 101). Normally the concept of othering is used to describe macro discourses and power is assumed to lie in the hands of the powerful who are the agents of othering, whereas those who are othered are assumed to be by and large powerless (for critiques see Bhatt 2006, Gingrich 2004). However, I use the concept to understand social processes in everyday life. This means that I analyse what these young men do with the othering they are subject to and that I ascribe more power and agency to the young men than is usually assumed when applying the concept.

Importantly, to speak of othering is not an alternative to speaking of racism(s), but a way of addressing an aspect of racism(s). Hence othering concerns the consequences of racism in terms of symbolic degradation as well as the indeterminate processes of identity formation related to it. Furthermore, othering can be intersectional and does not rely solely on the symbolic power of race or ethnicity (see below).

The notion intersectionality was originally coined by black feminist scholars in an attempt to grasp the specificities of the situation of black working class women in the US (Crenshaw 1989, 1991, Collins 1993). However the concept may have a great deal to offer for understanding minority men (Wingfield 2008). It has been argued that intersectional thinking can be used to analyse interplay between power structures at the macro level as
well as identity constructions in everyday life (Jensen 2006a, Christensen & Siim 2006), both dimensions being relevant here.

Although it is now a commonly used concept in gender research, I consider two core insights worth emphasising: that social categories such as gender, class, ethnicity, race and sexuality are mutually constituting and that the intersections of such categories are non-additive, in the sense that the implications of gender cannot just be added to the effect of ethnicity etc. (Staunæs 2004, Collins 1989, 1990).

In the words of Kofoed, ‘categories can exaggerate each other or subvert each other or even cancel each other’ (2005, 44). This insight can help us grasp how being a man can be a category of disempowerment and lack of privilege rather than a privileged position. Masculinity can intersect with other categories in specific configurations that subvert male privilege. Drawing on Crenshaw (1991) gender is always racialized. In a predominantly white society occupied with cultural difference as the Danish, hegemonic masculinity is necessarily white. However in order to obtain legitimacy and symbolic power this hegemonic masculinity needs to define itself in a relational opposition to visible ethnic minority men who are then pathologized, demonized and made illegitimate. Constructing hegemonic Danish white masculinity is possible only through othering visible minority masculinity.

I argue that this pathologization subverts several concrete dimensions of male privilege for visible minority men and results in marginalization on the labour market and the educational system. Although the young men addressed here are likely to have higher degrees of freedom than their sisters regarding for instance sexuality, their male privilege consist primarily of access to performing a symbolic repertoire of masculine dominance and masculine style, which does not necessarily provide concrete privileges (more about stylization below).

Partial subversion of male privilege is often the case with men who are for some reason regarded as feminine; however for visible minority men the case is more complex. As scholars of black masculinity have pointed out black men have often been considered hypermasculine. However the colonial gaze has also equated blackness with lack of rationality and with the body (as opposed to intellect). Since western thought historically associates the body and irrationality with the feminine (Witz 2000, Schott 2004) this also means that black men are historically feminized. In other words black men have historically been regarded as both too feminine and too masculine; as simultaneously lacking masculinity and having excess masculinity (Alsop, Fitzsimons & Lennon 2002, 150, McDowell 1997). Such sociocultural ideas are reproduced in the contemporary discourses outlined above, which portray young “immigrant” men in stereotypical ways as dangerous and/or as having a problematic sexuality.

Combining intersectional analysis of black masculinity with the concept of othering, we may argue that the othering discourses addressed here also yield ambivalence which
opens a space for agency. In the colonial gaze the black man as an iconic other is not only detested and feared but also – perhaps subconsciously – envied or admired. In the words of Mercer & Julien the racist perception yields both *Negrophobia* and (latent) *Negrophilia* (1988, 150). This ambivalence is tightly related to exoticism as a dimension of racism. In the words of Riggins, ‘The Other – once again misunderstood – is considered to be superior or perhaps strange but beautiful’ (1997, 5).

A third concept is *marginality*, which I use to describe the ‘objective’ position of these young men; thus marginality can be a concrete consequence of discursive processes of othering. Like Kristensen (1999), I consider marginality a situation characterized by incomplete participation in relevant social arenas. Of special importance here is the sociocultural meaning of marginality. Some authors consider marginality a situation of underprivileged and disempowerment; others, especially in social geography, consider the margin a (potential) *position of power and critique* (Shields 1991, 277, also Soja 1996, Diken 1998, 4). Similarly Park’s (1928) notion of *marginal man* [sic] entailed the idea of the marginal person being outside the ‘taken for granteds’ of the centre and thereby being able to see through their arbitrariness. In much the same vein, hooks (1984, 1990) shows that the marginal person has to know the rules of life of both the centre and the margin, and this produces a double capacity which may have critical potential. Combined these authors remind us that the view from the marginal space can relativize the doxa of the centre and have critical potential. Other authors warn us against idealizing marginality (Prieur 2007, 45). They remind us that there are limitations to the impact of marginal voices (Anderson 2003), and point out that marginality is related to overall structural conditions and should not be celebrated as voluntarily chosen freedom (Järvinen 2009).

We need to balance these points and grasp how the margin can be a site of agency and resistance although from a specific set of conditions.

**Othering in everyday life**

Reading across my empirical material it is clear that these young men are subject to a continuous series of othering experiences in their everyday life. They are, in central social arenas of everyday life, continuously reminded that majority society considers them different in a problematic way. A few examples are sufficient to illustrate this. In the excerpt below Ali talks about his experiences in school. I interview Ali in his youth club. He is 19 years old at the time of the interview and works at a pizzeria after giving up finding an apprenticeship as a mechanic. His former school, a Danish public school, is situated in a multiethnic area and has students from various ethnic backgrounds.

**Int.**: How was it to have black hair? You said it yourself.
Ali: It is annoying. It annoys us a lot, because we don’t get a chance. In public school, the teachers were, you know they kept an extra eye on us. They were always after us, and if anything happened, and we hadn’t done it, they always came to us, and asked us if we knew who had done it. And we know they think we did it, but they did not want to say. They just asked ‘Do you know who did it?’ They only came to us immigrants. (Interview with Ali, Århus Youthclub 7 November 2005)

In this excerpt Ali speaks of being subject to suspicion because of the way he is racially positioned. He thereby touches on processes of othering and marginalization that are well described in research on young ethnic minority men and school (Staunæs 2004, Jonsson 2007, Gilliam 2009). As Sewell (1997) has emphasized, marginalization of young black men in school is related to teachers reading the bodily signs of race, gender and age as symbols of trouble, but also to teachers being afraid of the young men, who are perceived as larger, rougher and more bodily.

Other informants tell about the othering gaze of the majority in everyday life. For instance Tahir speaks of his experience of being othered in the street. Tahir lives in the second biggest Danish City. In other parts of the interview he speaks of his encounters with right wing violence, however here he describes the mundane everyday experience of living in the city approximately a year after the attacks on the World Trade Center 11th September 2001:

Just on the street. You know, just the way people look at you. After September 11. People think that any guy with black hair is Al Qaeda, right?

Int.: Hmm. How is it people look at you?

Tahir: You’re just looked at with … you know, people think you are a terrorist when you are Arab or Muslim (Interview 3 November 2002).

Being seen is a basic condition of human life. Elg (2009) has shown how being seen, and seeing how others see us, conditions our social identity. By experiencing the gaze of the majority Tahir is made aware that he is considered different, and that this difference, through what we can conceptualize as the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity and age, is perceived as dangerous. I will return to the aspect of dangerousness later.

During my fieldwork I observed how otherness was constructed in the everyday life in the youth clubs. The following scene is from the fieldwork in the youth Club which had been assigned a special role in work with troubled visible ethnic minority youth. My overall impression was that this was a well-driven club with a peaceful atmosphere and a staff that reflected upon the multiethnic composition of its members. At the time of the
fieldwork the club had just ended a project called 'International Club' aimed at becoming more inclusive towards minority youth. However this club also displayed ambivalences in terms of reproducing ethnic differentiation and othering, in part as a result of demands imposed from the outside. The following scene illustrates this:

A little later two guys show up at the door. They look like their parents are from the Middle East. They are from the neighborhood. They are both wearing gold chains and stylish clothes, gel in their hair. One has a South Pole quilted jacket; the other a slightly longer tweed coat. They start negotiating with Jimmy [staff] about getting in (one is really older than 18 and therefore in principle not allowed to enter). There is a long, partially ironic, play where they are both trying to use the same social security card as proof of age. The card swiftly changes hands during the discussion. It turns out they work down at the local pizzeria as both Jimmy and the other guys at the door know them pretty well. In the end they are allowed to join the club. It turns out that you are supposed to write your nationality on the file cards, which are kept in a drawer by the desk. When Jimmy asks about their nationality one of the guys (the one with the South Pole jacket) says 'Kurd' and then adds 'Kurd for life' (Field Memo Wednesday 20 October 2004).

The excerpt recounts a seemingly innocent administrative procedure: To join the youth club, potential members have to declare their nationality/ethnicity. The procedure has been imposed on the club by the City Council, which wishes to monitor the composition of club memberships in the city. However, we can understand this procedure as constitutive for ethnic minority identity: Registering ethnicity/nationality meta-communicates that ethnicity/nationality is relevant to what goes on in the club and ethnified subject positions are constructed. Willingness to let oneself be categorized, in fact to categorize oneself becomes a prerequisite for access to the social community constituted by the club. In this episode the young men play along. Perhaps they are just happy to join, because club membership gives access to the club’s workout equipment and is cheaper than membership of a fitness centre. One of the young men even remarks that he is 'Kurd for life', paraphrasing a figure of speech from hip hop slang, and signalling that being Kurd is not only a basic condition of life, but something he is proud of.

My material clearly shows that these young men are frequently offered a status as the other. In several central social arenas including school, the youth club, riding the bus or walking in the city, encountering the police or going to parties on weekends they experience that powerful others see them as different and problematic. This does not take place in a single defining moment, but through a series of mundane everyday life occurrences which taken separately seem unimportant. However, I argue that the combined effect of these occurrences constitute othering, i.e. these young men are being defined into exist-
ence as different in a problematic way through subtle processes in everyday life. The specific form of otherness is intersectional: They are not only othered in terms of ethnicity or race; they are also ‘the other gender’, in the sense that they are the other gender in the first gender. As noted above the hegemonic Danish white masculinity draws its power from a relational opposition to visible ethnic minority masculinity. Hence these young men are routinely invited to inhabit the other masculinity, dangerous, illegitimate and inappropriate, which constitutes the first masculinity as civilized, legitimate and authoritative.

Perhaps the othering is also classed: Danish debates about the gendered culture of ethnic minorities sometimes revolve around the assumed illegitimacies of ethnic minority gender culture being related, not to ethnic minorities in general, but to an ‘ethnic underclass’ (Jensen 2007, 109).

The point is that othering is an intersectional matter. These young men are the other ethnicity, but also ‘the other masculinity’, and another class. In this way their otherness can only be understood as mutually constitutive intersections of several social categories. However, as much as being positioned as the other comprises a, perhaps painful, challenge it also makes up a specific set of possibilities and conditions for agency. I will now turn to how the young men in my sample reacted to this specific situation.

Stylizations as reactions to othering in everyday life

One specific form of reaction to othering can be conceptualized as stylization. Stylization here covers the double meaning that an aesthetic style is created and that something simple is created from something (more) complex. Among these young men a simplified – perhaps even stereotypical (Sandberg 2005) – black masculinity was often articulated as a subcultural style. The young men took up the imagined atrocities of visible ethnic minority masculinity inherent in the othering discourses and used them as a raw material to produce style.

One possibility was to ‘become’ dangerous: During my fieldwork I participated in a release party of a hip hop CD produced in the social project. Among the visitors were quite a few young marginalized ethnic minority men, some of whom I had met before. I observed how a combination of dangerousness, locality and ethnic/national differences was common in the way they dressed. Most wore street wear: Caps, sweatshirts, sneakers and baggy pants combined with visible signs of ethnicity and/or locality, which were integrated in the modes of expression of street wear. For instance one had a typical street wear key string with the text Palestine. Many wore black baseball caps or street wear jackets with Norrebtrux or just the acronym NBX (slang for Norrebro) printed on them. Some also wore caps and sweatshirt with the text Blågårds Plads. Both Norrebro and Blågårds Plads are known in the mass media as dangerous areas (Hjarnø 1998, Mørck 1999). Some wore sweatshirts and baseball caps with the text Outlaw. Many of the texts were
written in gothic style letters, connoting insignias of biker groups on the one hand and the aesthetic of (tattoos of) US Latino gangs on the other (Field Memo February 2003). In total a combination of signs of ethnic difference, locality, outlaw identity and the styles of street wear, creating connotations to the masculinities inherent in US hip hop and gangster rap, comprised a strong signal of dangerousness. Hence ‘becoming’ dangerous is a possibility inherent in this specific type of othering.

Another possible way to stylize the position of the other was to ‘become’ sexy. One example is Nadim who I met in the club which had been assigned a special role in work with troubled visible ethnic minority youth. At the time of the fieldwork Nadim is 17 years old. He has been in Denmark since the age of 4, when his Palestinian parents immigrated from Lebanon. Nadim told me that as a child he did not like being called ‘perker’ – a strongly derogatory Danish term for Middle Eastern or North African immigrants. However, he later appropriates the term and calls himself HotPerker as user name on a chat site. I saw his profile photos where he poses as an attractive, young, ‘black’ man with a well-trimmed body and dressed in hip hop and RnB styles. Nadim uses his position to become sexy and the strategy seems to work; according to himself and my observations he is popular among (some of) the girls. Importantly, however, this process of becoming sexy is interwoven in a process of becoming dangerous. Nadim tells me that around the same time as he began calling himself HotPerker he and some friend formed what he calls a gang, called Never Die Alone. The gang members were supposed to protect each other in Aalborg’s nightlife (Field Memo April 2004). Mirroring the tight relation between dangerousness and sexuality in the othering discourses about these young men, becoming dangerous and becoming sexy is closely related in Nadim’s account. Nadim is perceived as sexy because he is seen as dangerous in a cool way. A similar relation is made clear in an interview passage in Döner, a lifestyle magazine targeting young ethnic minority men, where the rapper Johnson, whose father is a black American, speaks of his relation to women:

*I only meet those girls who look at me, and then they know that I’m a player. The last 12 times I’ve had sex, they’ve wanted me to rape them physically. I’ve been strangling girls with my belt, smacked them, held knives to their throats, made them say ‘I’m a slut, give me cock’ […] – I have done all those nasty things, because they think I look like a criminal and that turns them on* (Interview in Döner no. 1, 2003).

The excerpt illustrates the relation between being dangerous and being sexy. Johnson speaks of himself as a man – young and black – who is (perceived as) dangerous because he looks ‘like a criminal’. The combination of hip hop style, dark hair and brown skin allows Johnson to be perceived as dangerous in a sexy way. Johnson’s stylization – and to
some extent Nadim’s – echoes the conception of black men as virile and libidinous; a
conception which, according to Mercer & Julien, has colonial roots:

[The] essentialist view of sexuality is in fact based on the prevailing Western concept of sexuality which already contains racism. Historically, the European construction of sexuality coincides with the epoch of imperialism and the two inter-connect. Imperialism justified itself by claiming that it had a civilising mission – to lead the base and ignoble savages and ‘inferior races’ into culture and godliness. The person of the savage was developed as the Other of civilisation and one of the first ‘proofs’ of this otherness was the nakedness of the savage, the visibility of his sex. This led Europeans to assume that the savage possessed an open, frank and uninhibited ‘sexuality’ – unlike the sexuality of the European which was considered to be fettered by the weight of civilisation. (Mercer & Julien 1988, 106–107, emphasis in original)

In colonial thinking the black person is seen as ‘overembodied’, naked and hypersexual. This ideology stabilizes the Western male self as minded, civilized and rational. However such conceptions to some extent live on – for instance in the popular image of the sexually superior black male (Mercer & Julien 1988, 119, 135). I argue that this idea of the sexy black man can be actualized by stylizing oneself using elements from hip hop, a cultural form which in some versions revolves around the image of the black male as dangerous and virile. For these young men constructing gender through hip hop then allows them to accentuate the latent admiration of blackness. In order to obtain value in an otherwise degraded position they stylize a black heterosexual masculinity which can be locally attractive. At the same time some of them identify directly with the description of marginality central to many rap lyrics (Sernhede 2002, Jensen 2008b).

To sum up, when visible ethnic minority status is mediated through hip hop it is possible to exchange blackness for sexiness and dangerousness. This exchange is, however, conditioned by elements from hip hop, which is controversial in terms of its often misogynist and masculinist form and content (Crenshaw 1991, McDowell 1997, Armstrong 2001, Cole & Guy-Sheltall 2003, Weitzer & Kubr in 2009 for appraisals less pessimistic in terms of gender see Hooks 1994a,b, Sernhede 2001, 2002, 2009, Sandberg 2008, Møller 2009). As part of the hip hop repertoire some of the young men in my sample would sometimes articulate misogynist or sexist ideas. However, in order to avoid essentializing these young men as ‘black macho’, it is important to maintain a distinction between style and dimensions of practice that are in some sense outside this style. Such a distinction is likely to rest uneasily with some readers, since a number of theoretical traditions from Goffman’s idea of performance (1959), over West & Zimmerman’s idea of doing gender (1987) to Butler’s idea of performativity (1993) have been preoccupied with problematizing similar divisions. Following these figures of thought masculine style can be seen as it-
self a form of praxis, i.e. masculinity is performed practically. However I wish to main-
tain that it is problematic to synonymise performativity with practice, since practice has 
its own logic which is not reducible to, in this case, citing the symbols of black heterosex-
ual masculinity. Furthermore I consider the possibility of identifying differences between 
what people say and what they do an impo-

The margin as a site of resistance

Stylizations along the sexy-dangerous nexus can be considered one type of gendered re-
action to othering. However, the margin can also be a site of resistance. Here I distinguish 
between subtle and inarticulate oppositional behaviour, which can be interpreted as hav-
ing a dimension of resistance, and more articulate political resistance. Central to the 
latter type of resistance is the observation that these young men often experience marginal-
ization and othering from Danish society. However due to the gendered division of la-
bour in Danish society the welfare sector is mainly staffed by women. Therefore when 
these young men encounter official representatives of Danish society, welfare state work-
ers, these are most often female. Therefore playing out a repertoire of masculine domi-
nance becomes relevant for resistance. The motif of resisting through masculinity is well 
known from research on male subcultures. For instance ‘the lads’ in Willis’ classic work 
on working class resistance in school resisted school by feminising teachers and school 
conformists (Willis 1978). In the words of McRobbie gendered domination can be used 
as ‘a kind of last defensive resort’ (1980, 42).

During my fieldwork I observed how bullying of adult female social workers could be 
part of an oppositional behaviour which could be interpreted as a form of subtle, and 
perhaps misplaced, resistance. One night in the TV room at the youth club which had 
been assigned a special role in work with troubled visible ethnic minority youth I ob-
erved how the young men, quite restless this particular evening, started to fight for fun. 
Some of the fighting started to look serious and the young men tricked one of the female 
staff into separating two fighting boys. The moment she touched them they stopped and 
started laughing. She scolded the young men, trying to make them behave. The group be-
came even noisier, ‘swarming’ around her, joking about her. When she addressed one 
young man, the others made faces behind her back. At one point one of them bumped 
into her, making her visibly scared. A few moments later she threw the smallest of them
out. The young men reacted by sitting down at the tables closest to the desk she was managing, singing ‘she’s got a cock’. The singing was clearly addressed to her although this was never made explicit. While singing they laughed and looked at her for a reaction. Finally one of the male staff intervened and threw out the whole group. On the way out some of the young men made comments such as ‘democracy’ and ‘the negroes are being thrown out’ (Field Memo October 2004).

The episode was intense and the social worker was visibly scared. Perhaps sensing that she was afraid of them and would not confront them physically, the young men picked the female social worker as the object of their bullying. Hence the young men constructed themselves as dangerous black men by setting up a concrete asymmetrical relation to a frightened white woman. They then chose to challenge precisely her femininity by singing a song about a woman with male genitalia. In a sense they othered her, as an inappropriate kind of woman. In my interpretation the intention behind this challenge was to destabilize her position, since the woman with male genitalia crosses the complementarity central to these young men’s conception of gender. Such a woman is within this logic not a proper subject and therefore not someone who can hold or exercise power. Another possible interpretation could be that this is an accusation of homosexuality. Such an accusation would, within the heteronormative framework of these young men, make up a quite powerful degradation and potentially subvert authority.

In other words the episode was gendered in several ways. Afterwards the conflict was inscribed in a racial minority/majority schemata by the young men. Importantly the episode took place in the club where registration of nationality/ethnicity is a prerequisite for membership (see above). My interpretation is that what I observed was a subtle form of resistance, not directed towards this particular social worker or towards the club per se as this generally had a peaceful atmosphere, but towards what the young men perceive as representatives of a Danish society which is experienced as othering and racist. In that sense gender is used in oppositional practices and female professionals become hostage to processes they have only little influence on. This interpretation is backed up by several accounts and observations of oppositional behaviour towards female representatives of the official Denmark, such as social workers, teachers and police.

Even if such oppositional behaviour has a dimension of resistance it is problematic to celebrate it as such because, as Bourdieu has pointed out, it ‘stops short at the limits of the immediate universe’ and ‘targets persons rather than structures’ (Bourdieu 2000). Thus, what could be interpreted as resistance in terms of race and ethnicity is reproduction and conformity in terms of masculine dominance. In that sense, although I do not consider the masculinity constructed by these young men as hegemonic, they do draw upon a repertoire of masculine dominance in these encounters.

While episodes as the one reported above can be interpreted as a subtle form of resistance, resistance in more articulate political forms is also present in my ethnographic ma-
As shown above, hip hop as a cultural form of expression offers the young men opportunities in terms of becoming dangerous and sexy. However, for some of the young men this interest leads them to produce their own music. Hip hop, although controversial in terms of representations of gender, has potential to give the young men a voice, which is otherwise largely absent in the public domain. In other words hip hop has potential to make the margin a site of resistance, even if on very specific terms. Some of the young men would speak of this as ‘street politics’ (‘gadepolitik’). In an interview in the Danish hip hop internet site, rapper and producer Abu-Malek (whom I also interviewed during my fieldwork) explains:

Abu-Malek: You know, life isn’t pink flowers. No matter where you are. Maybe for those who live in Risskov¹⁵ and by the beach, and then they can talk about that. But when we represent the shit down here … then we need to rap about the truth. The reason I make music like that is that I want it to get into the brains of people. And gangster rap gets into your soul. And that is the purpose. ‘StreetPolitics’, that is also the name of our next record. So political, sure – in the streets […] As I have said before, a guy like Anders Fjog,¹⁶ right? They come and they talk […] and he is on TV. It is the same with us – we are just on the street […] telling it to you through music. So politics, maybe not so much about countries and stuff like that, but street politics – 100 percent. (Passage from the interview ‘Under Masken på 8210’ www.hiphop.dk)

For Abu-Malek rap should represent the truth about the areas he and his friend live in. Importantly this includes him rejecting the stop-the-violence message that prevails in some subgenres of hip hop. He chooses gangster rap, because this form is useful to depict what he considers the truth about the hard life in the suburbs – and perhaps also because this subgenre allows him to perform a hard and dangerous version of black masculinity. In other words the social critique voiced through hip hop is interwoven in a masculinist form. The same is true for another rapper, Turco, who in his text ‘I fear only Allah’ (‘Frygter kun Allah’) raps:

Of course we get stopped by some pigs

Wholla, I’m telling you they are a fucked up joke

They ask us where we have been, what the fuck we have been doing, which potatoes we have smashed

Only because of BT and Ekstrabladet¹⁷

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The Danish media are some fucking racists,
The same is true for your ugly minister

[...]

You are only after some fucking perkere

Turks, Arabs, Pakistanis and Serbs

The text criticizes harassment and racist media discourses, from a masculinist position, illustrated by the terms ‘pigs’ (police) and ‘potatoes’ (derogatory slang for Danes). In another verse in the same song, Turco raps about beating down ‘potatoes’ depicted as cowards who are only tough in groups. In other words the black masculinity constructed here is constituted not so much in relation to women, but rather in relation to Danish young men, who are feminized as cowardly and weak. This is paralleled by a swaggering – and stereotyped – performance of visible ethnic minority masculinity: ‘I’m fucking cool, I’m used to violence, so go home with your mother and start screwing.’

The street politics of these young men reflects how their resistance is conditioned by overall social power structures. Therefore it represents a challenge or an ambivalence to researchers interested in intersectionality and gender. It is a new, and perhaps radicalized, example of an old story of anti-racist resistance among black men taking masculinist forms. However this music is interesting as a social phenomenon, exactly because the masculinist constructions of the threatening and dangerous young black man appear side by side, sometimes in the same song, as lines that thematize, comment and criticize othering, racism and marginalization.

Conclusion and perspectives

The young men in my sample react to the challenge of othering by attempting to actualize the latently positive symbolic meaning inherent in the othering discourses. By drawing on stylistic elements borrowed from hip hop, the young men accentuate those representations of visible ethnic minority men that can ascribe value to their position. They stylize their selves along the sexy-dangerous nexus and make the subject positions offered by othering discourses valuable by mediating historical representations of black men as hypersexual and dangerous, through hip hop. They construct a black heterosexual masculinity which can provide value and they sometimes identify with the marginal position described in rap. While they accentuate certain aspects of the intersection of gender and ethnicity class does not seem to be a reservoir of symbolic meaning in the same way.
This stylization of black masculinity can be relevant in relation to other men as well as to women: Stylizing one’s self as dangerous is relevant in relation to other young men, because a reputation as dangerous can offer protection in rough street milieus (Sandberg & Pedersen 2006). But because being perceived as dangerous may also mean that you are seen as masculine and cool and therefore sexy it also made some of the young men popular among (some) women of the same age.

Other young men in my sample made the margin a site of resistance. One way is oppositional behaviour towards female welfare state workers, which can be interpreted as a subtle form of resistance towards representatives of a Danish society. Another more articulate type of resistance from the position at the margins is using the repertoire of hip hop to articulate what some of the young men called street politics.

Both in terms of stylizing the self and becoming dangerous/sexy and in terms of making the margin a site of street-political critique via rap music, the agency involved in appropriating elements of hip hop culture is gendered and related to young ethnic minority men. Hip hop is a strongly gendered, cultural form of expression, routinely articulating masculine dominance and celebrating the black male body in often stereotypical ways. Similarly the oppositional behaviour aimed at female welfare state professionals draws upon a repertoire of masculine dominance. In other words these reactions illustrate the possibilities and conditions inherent in the specific form of othering these young men are subject to.

Borrowing Cohen’s classic distinction between corner boys and college boys (1955), I should emphasize that the reactions to othering analysed above are specific to marginalized young ethnic minority men, and cover only one specific cluster of reactions among them. In other words this analysis cannot be generalized to all young ethnic minority men or even to all young marginalized visible ethnic minority men, albeit much Danish and Scandinavian research show similar empirical patterns (Andersen et. al. 2001, Sernhede 2002, Sandberg & Pedersen 2006, Hviid 2007, Jonsson 2007, Hammarén 2008, Klinker & Bilde 2009). Such a generalization would itself be othering.

Nevertheless the specific forms of reaction, working through or answering to othering discourses and marginalization analysed here represent a challenge or ambivalence to researchers interested in intersectionality and gender. Not only can the gender politics of the hip hop genre be considered problematic, these types of reactions are also problematic in relation to ethnicity and race, because the black-white binary is reproduced (cf. Hall 1997) and stereotyped (Sandberg 2005). In other words these reactions both contest and rely upon racism, in the sense that they rely upon exoticism – the fascination of the dangerous and sexy black male – as an aspect of racism. Masculine dominance is reproduced at the same time as racism is both reproduced and resisted.

The challenge posed by these types of reactions is not easily handled. A possible solution would be to bracket the discussion about whether these answers or ways of working
through are good or bad (cf. Hughey 2009) in favour of analysis and contextualization (cf. O’Donnell & Sharpe 2000, 53). There are some good arguments for bracketing, including: 1) an overemphasis on the masculinity of (subgroups of) ethnic minorities serves the interests of those who wish to keep gender inequality among ethnic majorities off the agenda; 2) such a discussion risks reinscribing colonial power asymmetries, this time as a discussion about how the good ethnic minority person should do gender; and 3) to some extent these forms of masculinity are conditioned by overall social power structures.

As an alternative we could strive to exercise what Les Back (2007) calls the art of listening, since there is a critique of racism and marginalization at play; a critique worth listening to even though it is sometimes articulated in masculinist ways.

Notes

1 I do not consider ethnicity and race as synonymous: Ethnicity concerns social differentiation related to imagined cultural distinctiveness and common origin, although ethnic boundaries in fact rarely coincide with cultural ones (Barth 1969, Eriksen 2002). Race concerns social differentiation related to the imagined essential significance of bodily markers. The two categories are however closely linked as bodily markers often function socially as a sign of ethnicity which is then conflated with culture.

2 See Jensen (2009) for a genealogy of the concept.

3 See Jensen (2008a) for a detailed discussion.

4 Following what Järvinen & Mik-Meyer call an interactionist perspective on qualitative method (2005) it can be argued that accounts about othering should not necessarily be considered substantially, but may function as a technique of neutralization (Sykes & Matza 1957). A wider treatment of this perspective falls outside the limits of this article.

5 The excerpts are fragments of field notes written down shortly after the actual observation and I have opted not to change them. Note, however, that I in this field note unintentionally perceive the social world through a racialized schemata of perception. I consider this an illustration of doxa working though an embodiment of social meaning, which works relatively autonomously from any intellectual stance (See Jensen 2007, 112 ff.).

6 The Los Angeles-based rap group NWA (Niggaz With Attitude) had its commercial breakthrough with the album Niggaz For Life (Ruthless Records, 1991).

7 Although some of these young men were not black in terms of pigmentation they all drew upon an iconic black masculinity in their construction of masculinity. Paraphrasing Alexander (1996) I consider this a stylistic involvement in the ‘art of becoming black’ hence exchanging brownness for blackness can be considered a strategy of becoming cool. At the same time this is in itself a stylization since it reduces complexity by cancelling the in-between-ness of being brown in favour of the unambiguity of appearing black.

8 I do not reflect systematically on the youth- or subcultural dimension in this article. See Jensen (2006a & 2010) for attempts at a gender-sensitive subcultural analysis of my data.

9 Just as the letters BX are sometimes used in hip hop texts to refer to the New York borough Bronx.

10 Note, however, that this took place before what mass media later sometimes referred to as the Copenhagen Gang War between ethnic Danish bikers and “immigrant gangs”, including a ‘gang’ from Blågårds Plads.

11 It can be argued that the name HotPerker accentuates the latent sexual fascination with the orient (Said 1978); however due to the stylization of the body and his choice of dress I also
consider Nadim involved in the ‘art of becoming black’, hence these significations are not mutually exclusive (see also note vii).

12 This argument may be easier to accept when one considers the empirical observation that abusive gender relations can exist in the apparently gender-equal ethnic majority middle class, or even among left-wing radical men who are otherwise keen to perform pro-feminism (Christensen 2006). Therefore abusive practice can take place without masculinist styles, just as masculinist styles can exist without necessarily being paralleled by abuse of concrete women.

13 One could argue that a finding of resistance requires consciousness and explicit purpose among those who are supposed to resist, leaving only the second form addressed here relevant. As Raby has pointed out this criterion would hinder us from grasping resistance among children and young people, who often act less from explicit and conscious motives and more from an only partially conscious feeling of injustice (2005).

14 A comical song from the popular TV show ‘Drengene fra Angora’.

15 Risskov is a relatively privileged neighbourhood in Århus, while Abu-Malek is from Århus Vest, a highly underprivileged area.

16 Nickname for the Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh at the time of the interview. ‘Fjog’ is Danish for fool.

17 Danish tabloids.

18 See for instance Hughey (2009) for a thorough treatment of this problematic.

References


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