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Preliminary notes on othering and agency

Marginalized young ethnic minority men negotiating identity in the terrain of otherness

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Preliminary notes on othering and agency

**- Marginalized young ethnic minority men negotiating identity
in the terrain of otherness.**

Working paper presented at Castor Seminar Løgstør 13.-14. of May 2009

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Af Sune Qvotrup Jensen

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Abstract:

The article analyses othering as a specific space of agency. It outlines the history of the concept of othering as well as some current criticisms of the concept. Then it is argued that young ethnic minority men in Denmark are subject to intersectional othering, which, however, also contains elements of exoticist fascination of the other.

It is then, on the basis of ethnographic material, analysed how these young men react to othering.. Two types of reactions are illustrated: One embracing othering in order to capitalize on being identified as the other, and another resisting othering by disidentifying from the identity of the other. Finally, it is argued that one type of resistance, claiming normality, can be understood as an attempt to find a 'thirdspace' beyond first and other.

Keywords: othering, agency, ethnicity, gender, intersectionality

1 Othering and Agency

From a social science point of view, identities are in some sense always social. That is, identities, including ethnic minority identities, are always constructed within and by specific social contexts, but they are not reducible to these contexts as human beings have potential for agency. In other words, the study of social identity is the study of the interplay between situatedness and agency.

Danish public discourses on integration, migration and ethnic minorities constitute a specific case of such situatedness for ethnic minorities, including young ethnic minority men. As many have observed, these discourses have to a very high degree problematized the presence of 'others' in Denmark as well as pathologized their alleged 'culture', (Røgilds 2002, Diken 1998, Hervik 1999, Schierup 1993, Horst 1991), and young ethnic minority men in particular have been subject to pathologization (Jensen 2007, Andreassen 2005). These discourses can be considered illustrative of what Spivak calls Othering (1985). However, paradoxically such discourses, even if they are problematic and experienced as painful, also open a space for agency.

The article aims to illustrate empirically how othering is met with agency by some of the young ethnic minority men who are othered in and by discourse. By doing so, the article also raises questions about the structuralist understanding of identity formation inherent in the concept of othering, on two levels. Firstly, the idea that the power to construct identity lies with the powerful; here the article argues that the concept of othering should be balanced out by concepts well suited for grasping agency: embracement, capitalization, disidentification (Skeggs 1997), as well as resistance. Secondly, the idea that identity formation can be grasped as a dichotomous relation between self/first and other; here the article argues that some of the strategies used by the young men point toward the construction of a 'thirdspace' (Soja 1996).

The article starts by offering a brief history of othering. It then outlines Spivak's vexed contribution. The next part of the article analyses ethnographic data in order to examine whether these young men are becoming the other self. First, strategies which to some extent embrace othering are analysed. Next, strategies which can be interpreted as resisting othering are analysed. Finally, the conclusion takes up some of the underlying questions of identity formation.

2 A history of othering

Although first coined as a systematic theoretical conceptⁱ by G. C. Spivak in her 1985 article 'The Rani of Sirmur', the notion of othering draws on several philosophical and theoretical traditions. Importantly, the concept draws on an understanding of self which is a generalization – and perhaps primordialization - of Hegel's master-slave dialectic as developed in *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Hegel describes the relation between other and self as a dialectic relation between master and slave; as two aspects of the spirit. This dialectic is, however, transcended as the spirit develops. Nevertheless, Hegel is often – in what Heartfield (2005) calls a dispirited version of Hegel - read as a theory of self and other in which the juxtaposition towards the other constitutes the self. Or in the words of Lister '...Othering helps to define the self and to affirm identity' (2004: 102).

This understanding of self and other is prevalent in Simone de Beauvoir's *The other Gender* (1997). In her work, de Beauvoir describes how men are regarded as the norm and women as the other 'A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man' (ibid. 15). 'Man represents both the positive and the neutral...' (ibid. 15), and further 'He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other' (ibid. 16). Women are therefore described as lacking or a deviation from the norm. This description ultimately produces reality: 'when an individual (or a group of individuals) is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he is inferior. But the significance of the verb to be must be rightly understood here; [...] it really has the

dynamic Heglian sense of 'to have become' (de Beauvoir 1997: 24, emphasis in original). The otherness of women also produces subjectivity since, as Witz & Hughes emphasizes, de Beauvoir argues that *'women exist – and are only conscious of themselves – in ways that men have shaped'* (Hughes & Witz 1997: 49).

With explicit references to Hegel, de Beauvoir universalizes a theory of self and other, in relation to both gender and other social differences, when she states that *'the category of the Other is as primordial as consciousness itself'* (de Beauvoir 1997:16, emphasis in original). This relation is also primordial: *'Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the other over against itself. If three travellers chance to occupy the same compartment, that is enough to make vaguely hostile 'others' out of all the rest of the passengers of the train. In small-town eyes all persons not belonging to the village are 'strangers' and suspect'* (ibid. 17). In other words, de Beauvoir's reading of Hegel is also a move from dialectic to dichotomy.

Early postcolonial writing is another theoretical reference point, especially Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Said writes of an imagined geography which constructs the Orient as other in a reductionist, distancing and pathologizing way: *'there is no doubt that imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away'*. (ibid. 55). According to Said, Orientalism produces an image of the Orient which is also a moral system, in which *'the Orient ("out there" towards East) is corrected, even penalized, for lying outside the boundaries of European society "our" world; the Orient is thus Orientalized* (ibid. 67). At the same time as being exoticised, the Orient is incorporated and fixed *'at one and the same time to characterize the Orient as alien and to incorporate it schematically on a theatrical stage whose audience, managers and actors are for Europe, and only for Europe'* (ibid. 71-72, emphasis in original).

A third stepping stone is ideas of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Two important points can be derived from Lacan: Firstly, that language plays a central role in constituting identity. In Lacan's thinking '*Identities exist only in the intersubjectivity of language – the realm of the symbolic. This is where we bring ourselves into existence as subjects through identifying ourselves with the meanings of language which pre-exist us and which will continue to define the world after we are gone*' (Alsop, Fitzsimmons & Lennon 2002: 52). This understanding of identity later led Althusser to coin the notion of interpellation (1971), a notion grasping how individuals are called upon to occupy specific subject positions, i.e. achieve identity. Secondly, Lacan stresses that the powerful Other plays a key role in identity formation. Identity is fundamentally gained in the gaze of this powerful Other, i.e. parents or other close subjects, or sometimes the unconscious self (Gingrich 2004: 11).

3 Spivak's vexed contribution

Drawing on the sources outlined above, postcolonial writer Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was, as mentioned, the first to use the notion of othering in a systematic way. Although she uses the concept – once - in a review of Derrida as early as 1980 (39)ⁱⁱ, it is not until 1985 that Spivak begins to use the concept systematically, to analyse '*the fabrication of representations of historical reality*' (271) in the essay "The Rani of Sirmur"ⁱⁱⁱ. Here Spivak analyses three forms of othering present in archive material of the British colonial power in India. The first form is illustrated by the English Captain, who travels around Sirmur on horseback to tell the natives who their masters are. He writes in a letter: '[I have undertaken this journey] to acquaint the people who they are subject to, for as I suspected they were not properly informed of it and seem only to have heard of our existence from conquering the Goorkah and from having seen a few Europeans passing thro' the country' (Spivak

1985: 254, my emphasis). In Spivak's words, he is '*engaged in consolidating the self of Europe by obliging the native to cathect the space of the other on his home ground*' (1985: 253). In sociological terms, this is about power, making people aware of who holds the power, and hence about the powerful producing the other as subordinate.

The second form is illustrated in a letter from a General, Sir David Ochterlony, who writes about 'these highlanders' that '*I see them only possessing all the brutality and purfidy [sic] of the rudest times without the courage and all the depravity and treachery of the modern days without the knowledge of refinement*' (Spivak 1985: 254-255). In sociological terms, this is making the other pathological and morally inferior.

The third form is illustrated in a letter from *the Board of Control* in the British East India Company to a Lord Moira, who is its Governor-General-in-Council. The letter goes: '*..the limited degree of science which it may be consistent with good policy to impart to the troops of native powers in alliance with the British government, should be imparted to officers in our own service: because from those officers only we have a sure guarantee that our intentions shall not be overstepped*' (Spivak 1985: 256). By way of explanation: troops of native powers are the Indian army in colonial India, officers of our own service are the white British, and Science here means war technology. Hence the other cannot be given access to knowledge and technology, i.e. '*the master is the subject of science or knowledge*' (Spivak 1985: 256). In this process, a manipulative pedagogy is established, which in turn produces a difference between master and native which can later be read off as natural '*a difference in human or racial material*' (ibid. 256). Knowledge and technology is the property of the empirical self, not the colonial other.

It is worth noting that othering is described as a multidimensional process, in the sense that it touches upon several different power asymmetries^{iv}, and that othering as a concept can therefore be combined with what has later been conceptualised as intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989, 1991), or

interlocking systems of oppression (Collins 1989, 1990) in feminist theory and research (see also Collins 1993, 2000, Brah & Phoenix 2004, McCall 2005, Andersen 2005, Yuval-Davies 2006, Phoenix & Pattynama 2006). According to Spivak, in the case of the Rani the process of othering is classed and raced as well as gendered. It is classed since the othering is an integrated process in colonial, capitalistic exploitation of India by the East India Company. It is raced because the natives are racialized; they are described by the colonial masters as '*aboriginals of various kinds*' or '*foreign yoke*' (Spivak 1985: 263). And it is gendered because control over Sirmur is won by dethroning the Rajah and making his wife, the Rani, the formal leader under strict imperial control. As she becomes the vehicle of colonial power, she is not allowed to commit ritual suicide, or as Spivak writes '*she could not be offered the choice to choose freedom*' (ibid. 269). She must be kept alive, because it is through her that imperial power is maintained.

Summing up: the concept of othering builds on a Hegelian heritage; it is inspired by both feminist and postcolonial theory, and it is from the very beginning an intersectional concept.

It should also be noted that the concept does *not* focus on the fascination of the other. It does not – as a starting point – evolve around ambivalence or the exoticism of the colonial gaze (see below). The other is always the other as *in inferior*, not as *in fascinating*. It is also worth noting that the concept of othering is basically binary as it is based on the dichotomy of the first and the other, rather than that which transcends these binaries. In the words of Gingrich, Spivak '*claims that such fundamentally contradictory and different opponents as colonisers and colonised are seen as mutually defining each other's basic identities*' (2004:11). This understanding of identity is parallel to an understanding of language in which signs become meaningful in opposition to what they are not. Or in the words of Diken, '*the marked term is in fact necessary for the primary term to be defined*' (1998: 41). This is, as Elg has pointed out, a structuralist line of thought (2005: 29). I would add that generalizing structural linguistics to matters of social identity is in fact problematic

since it results in a structuralist thinking which privileges a gaze that fails to see the in-between, or the 'thirdspace' (Soja 1996) between first and other.

Othering is most often used to analyse macrodiscourses, related to geographical and social distance^v. The others are far away, both symbolically and in concrete geographical space. As pointed out by de los Reyes & Mulinari, the object of study of postcolonialism is the discourses and scientific representations of the other produced by the West, not the countries or subjects of the periphery (2005:73). The question of whether or not these representations have some kind of validity is bracketed; hence othering tells more about those who do the othering than those who are being othered (Riggins 1997: 10). The others, the ones who are othered, do not appear as subjects. In this aspect, othering is synonymous with what Pierik calls 'categorization by others' or 'ascription' (2004). A similar observation made Bhatt speak of postcolonial theory as '*a kind of heroic, narcissistic victimology that cannot name itself as such*', and to note that in this theoretical understanding 'the subaltern' is not '*a subject fully capable of ethical existence and judgement. In postcolonial theory, the subaltern is simply voiceless.*' (Bhatt 2006: 101). Others have, with explicit reference to Spivak's use of Lacan, spoken of a '*psychoanalytical fatalism in critical disguise*' (Gingrich 2004: 11). This criticism is based on the observation that in the psychoanalysis of Lacan, the subject obtains identity in the eyes of the powerful Other, whereas in Spivak's conceptualization this powerful Other becomes '*the imperial centres and their discourses*' (Gingrich 2004: 11). These then provide '*the terms in which colonialized subjects gain sense of their identities as being dependent. Simultaneously, this becomes the ideological framework, in which colonized people subjects come to understand the world. These are the 'others' that typically represent Spivak's colonial and postcolonial subjects, who only exist through, or against, the powerful gaze of the colonial discourse.*' (Gingrich 2004: 11). Hence in Spivak's theoretization, othering is something done by the powerful majority, and those who become 'the other' are objects in a process of

colonial interpellation. There is little room for existence outside the powerful gaze of the colonial centre (Gingrich 2004: 11).

Spivak's conceptualization is in accordance with contemporary uses of the concept. Lister for instance defines othering as 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); Schwalbe as '*...the defining into existence of a group of people who are identifiable, from the standpoint of a group with the capacity to dominate, as inferior*' (Schwalbe 2000: 777), or as '*...the process whereby a dominant group defines into existence an inferior group.*' (Schwalbe et al. 2000: 422). At the same time, the difference constructed through othering is problematized, in the sense that the group which is othered is also in the process defined as '*morally and/or intellectually inferior*' (Schwalbe et al 2000: 423). 'The others' are reduced to stereotypical characters and are ultimately dehumanized (Riggins 1997: 9, Lister 2004: 102). Such processes often imply reduction and essentialization in the sense that those who are othered are reduced to just one or a few negative characteristics.

4 Becoming the other self?

The rest of this article illustrates how othering can also be used as an analytical starting point for understanding cultural processes and identity formation in a social microspace. My point is that it is necessary to analyze thoroughly how people react to the othering they are subject to. Here this is done by using ethnographic data from my fieldwork among marginalized young men with ethnic minority background in Denmark. The data was collected as part of my PhD project investigating the meaning of gender, ethnicity and style in the everyday life of these young men. The fieldwork took place in four youth clubs in three Danish cities. A total of 126 rounds of observation were

carried out in three youth clubs and a social project for youths excluded from the standard educational system. Besides informal conversations, semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out, and a total of 23 young men aged 15-25 were interviewed in 18 interviews. In addition, I draw on material from magazines, music as well as internet ethnography.

In what ways, then, is the life of such young men in Denmark related to postcolonialism's concept of othering? It can be argued, based on Sernhede's examples from a Swedish context very similar to the Danish, that these young men and the social space they inhabit constitute a third world in the first world, and that they perceive their relation to the ethnic/racial majority - in particular social control agents - as an extension of a colonial condition (2007: 29). In Sernhede's study, this is mirrored in the way they speak about social workers, teachers, youth club leaders and administrative staff as an 'occupational power' (Sernhede 2007: 29). It can furthermore be argued that discourses about these young men in the Danish public space draw heavily on colonial tropes and cultural racism (Andreassen 2005), and that generally ethnic minorities are the object of strongly othering discourses in the Danish public debate (Røgilds 2002, Diken 1998, Hervik 1999, Schierup 1993, Horst 1991).

In the following, the concept of othering is used as an analytical starting point and the focus is on how the illegitimate other is positioned from outside, and how this creates a specific space for agency. In other words, the focus is on the agency of those who are attempted othered. The othering discourses of the majority become a backdrop – a site of agency - and the actors are those put in the position of the other, the colonial subjects.

4.1 *Embracing othering*

In Danish public discourses about migration, the category of young men I have been doing fieldwork among are being portrayed in a highly problematic way. Andreassen has analyzed how

'the news media has constructed a stereotype of young, visible minority males as criminal' (2005:75), and how media stories revolve around a representation of *'young visible minority males' involvement in what newscasters and journalists labelled gangs or groups'*, *'how they gather in city centers, how they commit crimes and violence'* (2005: 77).

Andreassen has also shown how minority men are portrayed as having a *'dangerously high libido'* (2005: 215), and how *'the media looked at the visible minorities with a gaze embodied with fear and myths about hyper-sexuality'* (ibid. 221), i.e. as being sexually dangerous (ibid. 191).

Discourses about sexually dangerous black Muslims draw on historical Western fetishism and sexualisation of the black male body, which combine fear and fascination (Mercer & Julien 1988).

Similar observations have been made by Alexander, who notes that discourses about a similar group of young men in the UK involve *'three interwoven strands: ethnicity, masculinity and youth. Each of these facets is posited in and of itself as constituting a problem – the coalescence of all three leads to prophecies of social doom'* (2000: 14).

Drawing on Andreassen and Alexander, it is possible to argue that these young men are subject to an intersectional othering, which is explicitly related to race, ethnicity and gender, but also to generation and urbanity, and which implicitly draws on imaginaries of a dangerous and sexually promiscuous *'underclass'* (Skeggs 2004).

My ethnographic material showed, however, that these discourses could sometimes be appropriated in collective, cultural processes, which could be termed subcultural in the neo-Birminghamian sense (Carrington & Wilson 2004), i.e. processes that in some sense *answer* a collectively shared situation. Sometimes such answers can take the form of constructing subcultural capital (Thornton 1995). Below, the term capitalization and the verb *to capitalize* is used to emphasize that the creation of capital is an active process involving agency. However, such agency is socially situated, and I therefore agree with the critics who advocate a rethinking of the concept of subcultural

capital, situating such capitalization in relation to hierarchical differentiation and power (Skeggs 2004, Carrington & Wilson 2004, Jensen 2006). In my material, it is by mediating otherness through elements of style taken from hip hop that othering can be capitalized upon, so that the self can be stylized and become attractive. In other words, the position of the other can become imbued with value if versioned through a hip hop iconography of black masculinity.

In my fieldwork, this was illustrated by the way some of the young men presented themselves on a Danish Internet site called Arto, designed for young people to chat in virtual space. Admir^{vi} had chosen the username *Thug-gangsta*. The name Thug-gangsta is clearly inspired by the rapper 2Pac, who has been pictured time and again with the word Thug tattooed in gothic letters across his naked muscular torso. Hirsir had chosen the name *lil' gangsta*, referring to the fact that he was rather short. Abdilatir had chosen the name *8210-cent*, a clever amalgam combining the local zip code for Århus Vest – the stigmatised part of Århus^{vii} where he lived - and global hip hop culture in the form of the popular rapper 50-cent. Nadim had chosen the name “Perker4Livet”, meaning Perkerforlife. The term perker is a strongly derogatory term for people of Middle Eastern or North African origin sometimes appropriated by the young men themselves in their slang^{viii}. The name Perker4livet is clearly inspired by, actually just a translation of, the name of the Danish perker rap group ‘perkerforlife’, who spell their name P4L, which is again a reference to the American LA-based gangster rap group NWA’s second album *Niggaz for life* (Ruthless Records, 1991). However, Nadim later changed his username to ‘HotPerker’, which does not entail any specific reference to hip hop, instead accentuating the possibility of becoming sexy inherent in the specific othering that these young men are subject to.

During my fieldwork, I have seen the profile pictures uploaded by Nadim and Abdilatir. In the pictures they pose like Afro-American rap or R’n’B stars, in street-wear with bandanas under their baseball caps.

These usernames and self-made photos illustrate that, given the opportunity to version identities in a virtual space, which gives higher degrees of freedom than they otherwise experience, these young men often pick a hip hop identity. The combination of usernames and their self-made pictures points towards a stylization of self, a situated agency building on elements from hip hop, to ascribe positive value to their position as other.

Similar ways of versioning the self can be observed among young men producing rap music. In recent years, the Danish hip hop milieu has seen the emergence of a subgenre often referred to as 'perker rap'. Highly controversial, this subgenre and the artists involved in it can be said, on the one hand, to reflect marginality while on the other to stage, or even 'turn up', marginality in such a way that marginality is turned into a brand, in an attempt to locally capitalize on othering.

In the song 'Hoes i klubben' [Hoes in the club], perker rap group Pimp-a-Lot^{ix} appropriates the presentation of the sexually aggressive black young man when they rap:

'Hoes in the club play it cool/ when they suck my cock it's clear/ that their pussy turns hot and moist / so hoes you know you gotta swallow my sperm.'

[Pimp-A-Lot crew, Uden om systemet, independent release, 2002, my translation]

The overall theme of the song is that even if women pretend otherwise, they are always willing to have sex with the group members.

One of the rappers loosely affiliated with Pimp-A-Lot and guest starring on several songs on their first album is 'Niggeren i slæden', which roughly translates into 'The nigger in the ride'. He later changed his name to Johnson, referring to his real name Marc Johnson, but also to the fact that Johnson is one of the many slang words for phallus. When interviewed about the name change in the hip hop magazine Action Speaks (no.1), Johnson says *'I think it's a question of moving on. I've*

been rapping about cars for 10 years. Now I want to rap a bit more about booze and pussy and cut back a bit on the cars ... [...].

Asked the same question in Döner – a lifestyle magazine targeting young ethnic minority men - he answers:

Johnson: *I'm going to rap about how totally cool I am when I'm macking pussy...*

Interviewer: *But that's the same as 'Niggeren i Slæden' raps about...*

Johnson: *Yeah, it's almost the same, but I'm a little older now. It used to be about me getting a hard-on every time I smelled pussy. Now it's about me not getting a hard-on every time I smell pussy.*

Interviewer: *You have a problem?*

Johnson: *Getting a hard-on? I wish so, I wish so.*

In the excerpt, the interviewer jokingly suggests that Johnson might suffer from erectile dysfunction; something Johnson dismisses with an '*I wish so*', implying that his problem is perhaps quite the reverse. By doing this, he stages himself as a virile black young man with a strong libido – a staging that connotes and draws upon the Western sexualisation of the black male body as well as the current Danish othering of sexually dangerous ethnic minority men. In other words, staging oneself as virile and libidinous is a form of sexualisation of the self. In the following excerpt from Döner, Johnson also stages himself as a sexual object:

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. And it's

just kind of hard to build up a relationship with a girl when you've been pressing her head down into a pillow with a knife to the throat and called her a whore, all night. That's the kind of girls I attract and I'm fucking tired of that.

(Interview in Döner no. 1, 2003)

This excerpt clearly illustrates the relation between being dangerous and being sexy. Johnson speaks of himself as a man – young and black – who is sexy because he is (perceived as) dangerous. As a person who is read off as dangerous because he looks ‘like a criminal’. Looking like a criminal is about style, and about style being read in a specific way when combined with certain bodily signs of race and ethnicity. The combination of hip hop style, dark hair and brown skin makes it possible that Johnson is perceived as dangerous, and therefore sexy. Or dangerous in a sexy way. Johnson as an icon or sexual object comes to carry the connotations related to Western imaginaries of black men as sexually dangerous and genitally well-endowed, which parts of US hip hop has appropriated. By stylizing the self using elements taken from the subcultural universe of hip hop, Johnson accentuates the latent positive sides inherent in the Western imaginary of the black man. It is by sexualizing the/his black male body that Johnson is able to capitalize on othering to make him appear sexy and dangerous.

It is obviously impossible to know what the young women Johnson has sexual relations with think of him – if they exist. However, for our purposes, it is enough simply to observe that it is possible for Johnson to tell us about his self *as if* that is the way he is seen. That he is able to produce – by using elements of style taken from hip hop – a self which has the potential to be read as sexy and dangerous.

The empirical examples above illustrate a type of reaction to othering which can be termed embracing. This type of reaction works by specifically not resisting to be the other, but by attempting to capitalize locally on being the other, by accentuating those dimensions within the ambivalent gaze of the majority which can be ascribed value. As Sandberg has noted, such strategies draw heavily on public stereotypes (Sandberg 2005). Similarly, Vestel has pointed out that the sign of the ‘dangerous foreigner’ is one of several available for the staging of self (2004: 449). In other words, what can be observed is a stylization of self, a form of cultural agency that allows these young men to capitalize on othering and become sexy and dangerous.

It is worth noting that the strategies analyzed here are distinctively masculine, if not masculinist (Prieur 2002). Therefore they are highly controversial, and in US debates about hip hop and rap parallel strategies have been criticised by black feminists (McDowell 1997, Crenshaw 1991; see also Hooks 1994a,b, Wingfield 2008 for a more nuanced analysis of US rap). McDowell notes that black men are being masculinised in hip hop at the expense of black women, who are being subordinated in the texts of much hip hop music (1997: 376). However, much rap – including perker rap - has political and antiracist contents, and therefore these vexing styles more illuminate the ambivalence between antiracism and feminism. However, it is worth remembering that there is not necessarily a one-to-one relation between the image of self produced through hip hop’s processes of stylization and the actual conduct towards concrete women, and that rap/hip hop as a cultural reservoir can empower marginalized minority men (Sernhede 2002, Sandberg 2008).

4.2 *Resisting othering*

Whereas the form of agency analysed above can be thought of as embracing and capitalizing on othering, strategies which can be understood as resistance towards being relegated to the space of the other are also present in my material.

One evening I accompanied a group of 10-12 young men and a social worker [Manou] from a youth club in Århus to the nearby smaller town of Skanderborg. We enter a supermarket:

The boys are kidding around and making a lot of noise. Mahir stops in front of a large stand with chewing gum. '*This is cheap*,' he says. Down in the frozen food section, there is some discussion about who wants ice cream with or without nuts; in the end Manau buys two packets with and one without. We head towards the checkout. The boys start joking by seemingly accusing each other of having stolen. '*Hey, that guy's taken something*', one of them says in a twisted, squeaky voice. Samir and Kawan are throwing the American football they brought along back and forth across the refrigerated display counter with this week's special offers and careful arrangements of fruit and vegetables. The boys get in line at the checkout and continue to seemingly accuse each other of having stolen some of the shops' products. '*Have you taken something, have you taken something?*' they ask each other in caricatured, high-pitched voices, as if imitating an imagined officious shop assistant. The women at the cash registers take it with a smile and get them through the checkout.

Field memo, Thursday 27 October 2005

In this situation, the young men seem, at first glance, to be mocking each other. However, in my interpretation, there is more going on, since the caricature of the officious shop assistant is played out in front of a larger audience: Manou (non-white), me (white), the women at the cash registers and the other customers (all white). To make a caricature of an officious shop assistant can therefore be interpreted as a way of saying: *We are well aware that you are probably thinking that kids like us have something that is not theirs in their pockets*. Hence the mocking carried out by the

young men can be understood as a comment, talking back to the othering gaze, a subtle form of resistance, a form of subversive caricaturing, resisting and at the same time playing with the image of the criminal immigrant young man as other. Resistance against the suspicion of being involved in criminal activities which the young men suspect others might have about them. There is of course no way of knowing what the staff and customers actually thought. But it is not unlikely that the young men have experienced being accused of criminal activities by police and other social control agencies because of their bodily markers of youth, immigrant background and maleness (Andreassen 2005: 115, Ansel-Henry & Jespersen 2003; for Norwegian examples see Finstad 2000: 93, Sollund 2007).

Other examples of resistance to othering were articulated in the field relations, i.e. the concrete interactions between the young men and me. The following interview exchange takes place in a project for youths excluded from the standard educational system, in Copenhagen's North Western district.

[The interviewer asks Tahir about the division of labour in his family]

Tahir: [...] *of course my little brother doesn't help my mother with the cooking, like.*

SQJ: *What do you think about this way of living, do you like it, or...?*

Tahir: *What do you mean?*

SQJ: *That stuff, like some, the women do some things and the men do other things.*

Tahir: *It's also like that in Danish families.*

SQJ: *Certainly, certainly. Yes.*

Tahir: *It is. It's often the mother who cooks and the father he...I've often seen that, like.*

SQJ: *Yes.*

Tahir: *...It's not...*

SQJ: *No, but I didn't say.*

Tahir: *No-no, no-no, but it's often like that. It's pretty normal.*

SQJ: *Yes.*

Tahir: *I don't see...it's pretty normal.*

SQJ: *Yes. I think it's fair enough. Ehm, when you grow older, would you like to live in the same way or..*

Interview, 16 December 2003

In the excerpt, Tahir is being offered the position as the ethnified other, illegitimate in terms of gender relations such as division of domestic labour. By a subtle underlying mechanism, the researcher is positioned as a representative of legitimate culture, and his questions are read as articulated from this position. This is related to the ways gender and ethnicity intersect in the Danish debate on migration and integration^x. When public discourse addresses gender, immigrants and especially immigrant men are often positioned as representatives of inappropriate gender inequality (Andreassen 2005).

In other words, the legitimate discourse about gender is carried into the field by a researcher who is already positioned as white and Danish, to young ethnic minority men who public discourse have already pointed out as illegitimate in terms of gender relations.

Tahir, however, resists the position he is offered. He objects and protests against the othering of him and his family. He disidentifies^{xi} from the identity he is being offered, and he claims normality, while at the same time accepting the implicit premise of not being Danish.

Other exchanges touch explicitly upon media representations and knowledge production. The following episode took place in a youth club in Aalborg:

AbdiRahmane and Thomas are in the room. Suddenly AbdiRahmane says loudly [referring to me]. *'Hey, what is it that he's doing, that guy?'* [...] *'He's a writer. He's written that book, you know'*, Abbas answers: *'Hey, what are you writing about us?'*, Ousamah asks [...] *'Hey writer'*, AbdiRahmane says and continues. *'Where do you want to go with that? You're on the wrong track. You need to become a doctor'*. [...] *'That's where the future lies. Not that writer stuff'*. He begins walking around the room. *'What do you want to write about us. What is there to write?'* He sits down beside me. *'Okay'*, he says, *'Let's say this is a talk show. You only get 5 seconds, and I'll ask you about something: What do you want to say about these young people here in Aalborg East. Remember, you've only got 5 seconds'*. *'Then you can't say anything'*, I start. *'Come on, say something'*, he says and continues, *'About the young people, they're in such a bad place and there's so much crime'*. *'Shut up, AbdiRahmane'*, someone says, laughing. *'You're confusing yourself'*, someone else adds. AbdiRahmane continues, still in his mock talk show host voice. *'There is a lot of crime, what do you want to say?'*. *'There isn't that much'*, I reply and continue, *'You're not gangsters or anything like that'*. *'Yes. it's true... there isn't'*, says AbdiRahmane. *'Not as much now as there used to be'*, Abbas adds and continues: *'We used to do a lot, but we're not doing as much now'*. *'Yes'*, I say, *'but it's not as much as it says in the papers'*. Abbas answers, *'The papers have written about us before, but that was then. Then we did a lot'*. AbdiRahmane ends his show. *'No'*, he says. *'That writer stuff is no good'*. In a slightly more serious tone he adds: *'It is okay, you're on the right track. But you have to come up with something else'*.

Memo, 4 September 2003

In the episode, AbdiRahmane is 'having a laff', joking with – perhaps even mocking - the researcher at the same time as entertaining the other young men in the room. He confronts the

researcher with the fact that the researcher, because of his academic position, has the privilege of producing authoritative descriptions of the young men. Probably without knowing it, he thereby touches upon the ongoing negotiations the researcher is having with himself about how to describe these young men, negotiations reflecting a larger 'crisis of representation' (Clifford 1988), which characterises sociological research about marginalized and excluded groups. Accordingly, I have difficulties giving a qualified answer when Abdirahmane takes on the role of a zealous journalist pressuring me for an answer by repeating the words '*What do you want to say*'. All I come up with is a somewhat quiet pointing out that they are not as criminal as they are often described to be. At the same time, AbdiRahmane is mocking the media's representation of the young men and the neighbourhood they live in, when, assuming the role of a talk show host, he insists that the young men '*are in such a bad place and there's so much crime*'. AbdiRahmane's joking can be interpreted as a comment on the discursive context which the results of the research will be a part of. This is important in terms of othering because, as shown above, Spivak addresses the privilege of controlling knowledge and representation as the property of the powerful, he who is in a position to produce othering. Hence, in my interpretation AbdiRahmane resists the agencies, whether related to research or media, that in his mind have the power to position him and his friends as criminal others living in '*a bad place*'; and he reclaims, on a symbolic level, the role of the 'representer', the powerful producer of knowledge.

5 Conclusion: on othering and agency

As has been shown through my empirical examples, othering is not a straightforward process of individuals or groups being interpellated to occupy specific subordinate subject positions. On the

contrary, agency is at play, and people far from always accept becoming the other self. Othering can be embraced, capitalized upon, resisted or disidentified from.

It is worth dwelling on the type of agency which have been termed embracing or capitalization. This type of agency illustrates that othering discourses can, in a paradoxical way, be part of the symbolic raw material of agency. Elements of othering discourses may be appropriated, because such elements can be given local value as part of a subcultural style. That is possible because the specific discourses of othering relevant here are not only fixing and pathologizing; they are perhaps also, at a deeper level, ambivalent in their gaze upon the other, as they also contain implicit exoticism and fascination of the other. The other can, as Riggins has pointed out, at one and the same time be devalued and reduced *and* be the object of more or less conscious desire, erotization and envy of the powerful majority (Riggins 1997: 5). This ambivalence is closely related to exoticism, in which the other '*is considered to be superior or perhaps strange but beautiful*' (Riggins 1997: 5, see also Sernhede 1996). Such ambivalence is not often reflected in analyses of othering. For instance, for some young ethnic minority men the fetishism of the black male body may function as a resource – an element in the '*pool of styles, meanings and possibilities*' (Willis 1978: 59) at hand for producing styles – offering them a way to capitalize on othering. In some sense, such processes of capitalization contain an embracement of othering, and they are therefore not without consequences - and may even sometimes contribute to fixing the identity of these young men. Nevertheless, they are an example of how othering creates a specific space for agency.

This has relevance for the wider sociological debates on the internalization of oppressive and stereotype representations. For instance Mercer & Julien points out that to a wide extent, black men have internalized '*the myth of black hypersexuality*' (1988: 159), and Bourgeois describes a process whereby the Puerto Rican young men he did field work among internalize their own structural marginality in such a way that they become the administers of their own oppression (1995). It is

possible that this really is the case with Bourgeois' informants as they are more marginalized than the young men I have done field work among. However, I would argue that it seems that the young men in my research *use* public stereotypes in a way which cannot be described as internalization. Another type of agency in relation to othering has been termed resistance. Discourses of othering can be played with, as the episode with AbdiRahmane illustrates. That is, othering can become an object for subversive irony in ways that can be characterized as resistance. In many instances, informants resist othering, whether in the form of the potentially ethnifying gaze of the researcher or in the eyes of third parties. The young men refuse to become the other, to inhabit the identity as other, and they often claim normality.

It is worth dwelling on the motif of claiming normality, which appears quite often in my material. This has at least two dimensions, which are not mutually exclusive. *Firstly*, as Sandberg and Pedersen point out, claiming normality, insisting that one is not that different, is a strategy for humanization. Constructing oneself as a normal, ordinary person is therefore also a way of appealing for sympathy and understanding (2006: 237). *Secondly*, it is worth noting that although these young men often claim normality, there is not one single case of informants claiming 'Danishness' in my material. This can be explained by the character of the Danish discourses about migration, as the nature of these discourses blocks the way to 'Danishness' for anyone not part of the imagined Danish kin (cf. Anderson 2003, Fangen 2007). Furthermore, aspiring to become Danish would imply aspiring to exchange one particular identity for another, to exchange firstness for otherness. The fact that the young men do not aspire to 'Danishness' but do claim normality can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to carve out a space in-between, a thirdspace, which is not defined by firstness and otherness, but transcends the dichotomy: simply as a human being - not Danish, but also not different from the Danish.

It should be emphasized that the types of agency described are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, some of my informants shifted between resisting and embracing othering. This capacity for shifting roles points away from structuralist understandings of identity. It seems that not (all) the young men I have been doing fieldwork among have (fully) internalized the othering representations of young, black Muslim men; or if they have, they have also internalized much more than this and in such a way that quite complex identities are produced. That, however, does not mean that the concept of othering should be discarded. On the contrary, the concept seems well suited for grasping a specific type of space for agency. It does, however, need to be balanced out by concepts suited for understanding agency. Othering representations are not always internalized, and discursive subject positions are not always inhabited. I therefore suggest that othering is always balanced out by concepts such as embracement, capitalization, resistance and disidentification.

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ⁱ The word othering itself is not Spivak's invention. It was used sporadically in philosophical texts as early as the 1920s and 1930s, but in these texts othering meant *change* or *analytically distancing oneself*, i.e. not in the same meaning as in Spivak.

ⁱⁱ This use forestalls the later analytical content of the concept, when Spivak writes '*in the usage of the modern languages of Northern India, "itara" – other - means not only "inferior" but is also the name of the untouchable castes*' (1980: 39).

ⁱⁱⁱ Sirmur is a highland region of the lower Himalayas, East of Punjab, West of Nepal and Sikkim and North of what is now known as Uttar Pradesh. The Rani is the Rajah's wife, who becomes the formal leader after the Colonial masters have dethroned the Rajah (Spivak 1985).

^{iv} In their study of relations between newcomers and permanent residents in rural English communities, Garland & Chakraborti (2006), however, insists on the specificity of othering of ethnic minorities, because it relies on racist assumptions about '*visibly different minorities*' and may include physical abuse.

^v There are, however, exceptions: Jaworski & Coupland for instance makes a noteworthy contribution regarding face-to-face interaction (2005), whereas Garland & Chakraborti uses the concept on the level of community studies (2006).

^{vi} All names used in the text are pseudonyms.

^{vii} Århus is the second largest city in Denmark.

^{viii} In certain youth milieus, the term *perker* has been turned into a badge of honour, in much the same way as the word nigger (often spelled nigga) in some parts of black urban US culture. Such processes in themselves illuminate the complex interplay between othering and agency in their complex character of appropriation, provocation and perhaps symbolic resistance and resignation.

^{ix} Pimp-a-Lot is a reference to the US rap record label Rap-A-lot with artists like Geto Boys, 5th Ward Boys and Scarface, who are all in terms of the content of their lyrics and geographical origin (Houston, Texas) ascribed to the Genre Dirty South. In one of my interviews, the leader and producer of Pimp-A-Lot, Abu-Malek, says that he likes Dirty South and is a dedicated fan of Geto Boys.

^x I argue that such mechanisms do not rest (primarily) on the individual characteristics of the researcher. This claim is based on the observation that similar mechanisms occur in other parallel

research projects, in different institutional settings, by other researchers, but in the same national discursive context (Andersen 2005, Hviid 2007, Staunæs 2007).

^{xi} The concept of *disidentification*, and the verb *to disidentify* (Skeggs 1997), denotes an intentional and marked distancing from identity categories. It is therefore different from a mere absence of identification.