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*Published in:*  
Nordic Journal of Migration Research

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*  
[10.2478/njmr-2019-0038](https://doi.org/10.2478/njmr-2019-0038)

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*Publication date:*  
2019

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Smedegaard Nielsen, A., & Myong, L. (2019). White Danish Love as Affective Intervention: Studying Media Representations of Family Reunification Involving Children. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 9(4), 497-514. <https://doi.org/10.2478/njmr-2019-0038>

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# WHITE DANISH LOVE AS AFFECTIVE INTERVENTION: *Studying Media Representations of Family Reunification Involving Children*

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Received 10 October 2018; Accepted 02 October 2019

## Abstract



Through a close reading of media reporting from 2017 to 2018 on the case of the Chinese girl Liu Yiming, who was first denied then granted residency in Denmark due to public pressure, this article analyses how regulation of family reunification involving children is negotiated in the Danish public imaginary in the context of strong anti-immigration sentiments. This imaginary projects the white Danish public as eager to love Yiming and as affectively invested in reversing the injustice done to her and her family. The article suggests, however, that the outpouring of white love, which functions as an affective intervention imbued with the promises of reversing Yiming's deportation, is deeply embedded in exceptionalist notions of the 'integrated' migrant and that it works to restore an idealised image of a Danish nation defined by 'human decency' as a core value. Thus, the analysis raises critical questions to the politics of white love and its promise of securing social change for the 'integrated' migrant through collective acts of white feeling.

## Keywords

Family reunification • Media • Denmark • Affect • Nation • Whiteness

## Introduction

In late May 2017, the then 13-year-old Chinese girl Liu Yiming<sup>1</sup> was denied residence in Denmark because she did not exhibit the legally required *potential for successful integration*.<sup>2</sup> Yiming's Chinese mother has Danish residence and her white stepfather is a Danish citizen; at the time of the rejection, they had been cohabiting in Denmark for 8 months. The rejection gave rise to strong reactions from the Danish public, with many people protesting against the pending separation of the family. The case was closely followed by Danish media, both locally and nationally, and in most instances, the reporting conveyed the message that

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Yiming and her family had suffered a gross injustice. Following the media attention, Yiming's deportation was put on hold while the authorities processed an appeal to give her residency. In March 2018, the Danish appeal court (Udlændingenævnet) concluded that Yiming *did* possess the 'potential for integration', thus prompting a reassessment of her application for family reunification. This decision was made less than 2 weeks after Yiming appeared on national TV as her family scrambled to attract public attention to their situation (DR 2018). Later in the same month, Yiming was finally granted a 3-year residence permit.

We have selected Yiming's case for analysis because it raises important questions about how family reunification is represented in Danish media and the political landscape of race and nation that forms the context of (resistance to) anti-immigration politics in Denmark. What is striking about this case is not only how Yiming herself was portrayed as an exceptionally lovable and 'integrated' migrant who 'deserved' to gain residency in Denmark but also how the media portrayed the public's love for Yiming as an affective force to be reckoned with. Taking our starting point in the analytical concept of affective intervention, we unpack the politics of these representations. By *affective intervention*, we refer to how public displays of affections – in this case positioning Yiming as a 'worthy' object of love – have aimed to revoke the decisions made by the migration authorities; thus, we use affective intervention as a critical analytics to apprehend how the politics of migration is negotiated and influenced through affective registers (e.g. through public outpourings of love). Following from this, we also argue that the outcome and profit generated by the affective intervention surrounding Yiming may be considered as a type of *affective agency* imbricated in exceptionalist politics and nation-building. Thus, our analysis will be guided by the following questions: how and to what effect does Danish media represent white Danish love as an affective intervention aiming to reverse the state-sanctioned separation of (transnational) families? And what kind of promise does (white) love hold for a white Danish public seemingly eager to *feel* and empathise with the injustice done to Yiming? We begin by outlining the context of family reunification governance and anti-immigration sentiments in Denmark.

## Governing family reunification in Denmark

In recent decades, family reunification has gained attention as a domain that can and should be governed to minimise the number of migrants in Denmark (Bissenbakker 2019; D'Aoust 2013b; Schultz-Nielsen & Tranæs 2009). From around 2000 and onwards, different measures aiming to place limits on family reunification were implemented into Danish legislation (Adamo 2016).<sup>3</sup> One example involving children is the requirement called *potential for successful integration* (hereafter referred to as *requirement of successful integration*) that was implemented in Danish law in 2004. The requirement applies to children above the age of 8<sup>4</sup> seeking reunification with a parent living in Denmark while the other parent is living in the child's home country as well as to children over the age of 8 living with a parent outside Denmark (Udlændingestyrelsen 2018). The requirement of successful integration states that family reunification should only be granted in cases where it is judged that the child 'ha[s]

the possibility of acquiring sufficient ties to Denmark to be able to integrate successfully' (ibid.).<sup>5</sup> When assessing the potential for successful integration, the immigration authorities consider the child's and the parents' connection to Denmark as well as 'the duration and character of the child's stay in his/her home country and in Denmark, whether the child has resided in Denmark prior to the application, which country the child has spent most of his/her upbringing in, where the child has gone to school, and whether the child speaks Danish and/or the language of his/her native country' (ibid.). In relation to the parent, assessment criteria include employment, educational activities, Danish language skills, and contact with the child as well as '...efforts made by the parent living in Denmark to become integrated' (ibid.).

The governing of family reunification takes place against the backdrop of many years of anti-immigration legislation (Adamo 2016; Bissenbakker 2019; D'Aoust 2013a, 2013b; Fair 2010) and anti-immigration debates in Denmark (Andreassen 2007; Hervik 2011; Rytter 2018; Yilmaz 2016). These domains have been dominated by arguments that Denmark is accepting too many immigrants, in particular from the Middle East, and that their presence poses a threat to societal cohesion (Yilmaz 2016: 74f, 162f). The anti-immigration framework has, to a great extent, been assembled vis-à-vis exceptionalist notions of Denmark as a tolerant and non-racist welfare state that is now at risk of being undermined by 'unintegrated' migrants and their descendants, who are often imagined as exploiting the Danish welfare system (Rytter 2018; Yilmaz 2016) or by 'divisive' forms of identity politics (Danbolt & Myong 2019).

While several studies have examined Danish media representations of immigrants from different entry points (Andreassen 2007; Hervik 2011; Hervik & Boisen 2013; Smedegaard Nielsen 2014; Stage 2011; Yilmaz 2016), we have not been able to identify studies that specifically investigate the representations of family reunification in Denmark. Our preliminary examination of media representations of family reunification between 2000 and 2018 confirms, however, that the issue of white Danish citizens being barred from cohabiting with their non-Danish spouses or other family members constitutes one of the most debated topics in this area of reporting. The politics of centring white Danes in relation to family reunification is also present in some of the political protests against the restrictions (Myong & Bissenbakker 2016) and in the political agendas of organisations, such as Marriages without Borders (*Ægteskab uden grænser*) and Danes Worldwide, that have been formed with the specific goal of securing the rights of family reunification for Danish citizens. These observations indicate that family reunification is primarily framed, in politics as well as media, as a question of rights and potential loss for white Danish citizens, something that underscores the importance of analysing how whiteness informs media representations of family reunification.

## **Theoretical framework: national belonging and white love as affective intervention**

We approach the requirement of successful integration as part of a biopolitical regime (Foucault 2003). To be more precise, it may be conceptualised as 'a mechanism ensuring

that the state's freedom to select [its citizens] outweighs the individual's freedom to move' (Bissenbakker 2019: 9). Likewise, the requirement of successful integration can be conceptualised as a technology that makes migrant children governable through a biopolitical framework in which the subjectivities and the histories of these children are produced and measured against the standard of 'integration potentiality' (as stipulated by the integration requirement). As a governmental technology, the requirement of successful integration may be understood as what Sara Ahmed (2006) calls an orientation device, which turns subjects and populations towards national ideals (e.g. Danishness, 'integration' or the family) and away from other belongings and identifications (Bissenbakker 2019).

This article does not analyse the requirement of successful integration as such: our interest is focused on the political struggles that take place in media reporting. Following from this, we understand media representations as imbricated in the biopolitical processes of nation-building (Smedegaard Nielsen 2014) and 'the nation' as continuously produced and reproduced in order to be upheld as a meaning-making category. Thus, we address nation-building as discursive and affective processes in which the nation is construed as the object of nationalistic emotional investments through the positing of an imagery of the ideal nation (Ahmed 2004a; Hage 1998). In the words of Sara Ahmed, we may think of the nation as 'an object of love that is shared' (2003: n.p.). This framework allows us to view media representations involving migration as affective technologies that mediate 'the dirty work of boundary maintenance' (Favell in Yuval-Davis 2011: 24), for example, in how they work to align some migrant bodies with national ideals while rendering other migrant bodies incongruent with the same ideals. To think of media representations as affective technologies is an attempt to grapple with the regulatory and performative aspect of these representations, and how children become governable through affective frameworks such as 'integration potential'.

This approach, in which affect is understood as mediating the relationship between the psychic and the social and between the individual and the collective (Ahmed 2004b: 119), is aligned with work that investigates how the issue of national belonging is regulated and assembled through affective relations of love and desire (Berlant 1997; Fortier 2013; Hage 1998; Somerville 2005). According to Sara Ahmed's suggestion, love works to stick bodies and communities together (2004a, 2004b); there is she argues a 'towardsness' about love, it moves us in specific directions. In this sense, we are not invested in defining love as an individual disposition that secures national belonging for/within the subject who loves the nation; we are more interested in the nation-building function of public displays of love and 'how love becomes a way of bonding with each other in relation to an ideal' (Ahmed 2003: n.p.). We use love as an analytical translation of how affective expressions of devotion, empathy, solidarity, loyalty, compassion, and care are articulated in the empirical material.

Writing from a Nordic context, we understand the racialised logics of nation-building as intertwined with whiteness as a structure of power and as 'a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced, and [...] intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination' (Frankenberg 1993: 6). Whiteness continues to permeate the biopolitics of the welfare state where processes of (non-)belonging are violently produced

through nationalistic and racialised (white) ideals such as Danishness, Finnishness and Swedishness (Andreassen 2007; Hervik 2011; Hübinette & Lundström 2011; Keskinen 2013; Smedegaard Nielsen 2019). As we demonstrate in the following, the public love engulfing Yiming must be understood as invested in notions of Denmark and Danishness as inherently good; an investment that upholds, rather than dismantles, white hegemony. We build on scholarship that investigates how love between white bodies and black bodies/bodies of colour is idealised in the Danish context; an idealisation that affords ‘the white subject the opportunity to understand herself/himself as non-racist and as a lover of diversity’ (Myong & Bissenbakker 2016: 12). One effect of this ideal is that specific forms of love (say, love embodied by the transracial family) come across as more worthy of protection than other forms of racialised love (Horsti & Pellander 2015). In this article, we connect love and agency by suggesting that in the case of Yiming (white), love emerges as a form of affective intervention resulting in *affective agency* grounded in exceptional politics. We argue that this agency may secure national belonging for Yiming, but it also affords the (white) subject a sense of agency without committing to systemic change.

## Archive and approach

The empirical background for our analysis consists of an archive of written, visual, and audiovisual media representations from newspapers and journalistic online media concerning cases of family reunification for children starting from 2004, when the requirement of successful integration was implemented, to 2018. On the basis of extensive readings of this archive, we have chosen the case of Yiming for in-depth analysis. Yiming’s case is illustrative of how Danish media discursively frames the enforced separation between parents and children in white–interracial families.<sup>6</sup> Yiming’s case, however, is remarkable in terms of the media intensity it has generated, and for the centrality of Yiming’s white Danish stepfather, Kjeld Gaard-Frederiksen, who has played an active part in attracting public attention. In particular, we find it interesting how the media has emphasised his position as a former navy officer serving Danish interests abroad, and thus how the white Danish masculinity embodied by Kjeld<sup>7</sup> informs the representation of the case.

We have identified approximately 175 articles and television broadcasts about Yiming’s case in the Danish media database *Infomedia* using the search word ‘Yiming’. *Infomedia* collects all Danish newspapers published daily, nationally or regionally, as well as other news sources.<sup>8</sup> From these, we have selected 150 articles and video clips from five media outlets: *Midtjyllandsavis* (regional newspaper), *Ekstra Bladet* (tabloid), *Jyllands-Posten* (broadsheet newspaper), *TV-2* (national broadcasting service), and *TV Midt Vest* and *TV2-Østjylland* (both local branches of *TV-2*). The selected material, which includes news coverage, opinion pieces, and feature articles, was published between 25 May 2017 and 27 March 2018; most of this material was published in the days after Yiming’s case was first brought to the attention of Danish media. The coverage waned after 1 June 2017, when Yiming’s deportation was temporarily suspended, but the media continued – although

not with the same intensity – to follow the case until late March 2018 when Yiming was granted a 3-year residence permit. Our analysis will focus on three central themes in the media reporting: first, how Yiming is positioned as an exceptionally ‘integrated’ and lovable migrant; second, how the reporting centralises Yiming’s white Danish stepfather; and third, how popular support and love for Yiming orientates the Danish public towards a shared ideal of Denmark as a tolerant and inclusive society. These foci enable us to unpack how the reporting works to support collective affective investments in an imaginary national ideal. We end with a discussion of how Yiming’s case reflects the exceptionalist politics underpinning public displays of love and the ideological function of love in nation-building processes.

## The exceptionally ‘integrated’ and lovable migrant

The Danish tabloid *Ekstra Bladet* was first to report on Yiming’s case (Göttler 2017a, 2017b). The framing of this reporting is characterised by a discourse that construes Yiming’s case as an example of how legislative measures have gone too far, describing the immigration authorities’ decision to deport her as ‘cynical’, ‘ice cold’, and ‘machine-like’ (Göttler 2017b). In a multimedia article published on *Ekstra Bladet*’s online platform (Göttler 2017a), Yiming is portrayed as an exceptionally ‘integrated’ and well-liked child, in particular, because of her intellectual capacities. As a rebuttal to the brutal immigration rules, the article stresses that Yiming is a ‘model pupil’, having learned Danish after 6 months in Denmark, and Yiming’s stepfather is quoted as praising her integration: ‘She is the most well-integrated [child] I have seen, she speaks Danish and is well-liked and has many acquaintances and she is diligent and motivated in school’ (ibid). This framing reverberates throughout the material. In the reporting, attempts to unearth evidence of Yiming as already ‘integrated’ foreground the local community of Silkeborg in Jutland where she lives; her attachment and contribution to this community are invoked numerous times, for example, in interviews with local politicians (TV-MV 2017a). In other words, the relation between Yiming and the local community is represented as one of mutual love, creating a sense of equal attachment and dependency. Indeed, this is visually represented in the form of an image showing Yiming’s schoolmates’ hands holding on to a notebook carrying her portrait and the words ‘We won’t let Yiming go’ written on a label. The image appears as an illustration to an article titled ‘6. klasse holder fast i Yiming’ [6<sup>th</sup> Grade Holds Onto Yiming] (Rosenquist 2017b), in which her teacher states: ‘She is in many ways everything you as a teacher dream about’ (ibid).

As evidence of Yiming’s successful integration, *Ekstra Bladet* invites Yiming to state her view of Denmark, and in a video clip Yiming answers that ‘I like Denmark, I have my mum in Denmark, I have friends [...] I love Denmark’ (Göttler 2017a). However, it is not Yiming’s voice and verbalisation of how she experiences the situation that dominates the coverage in general. In the reporting, it is predominately white Danes who appear both as the authoritative voices who can provide trustworthy testimonials about Yiming’s integration (Husum 2017a, 2017b; Jørgensen 2017; Nielsen 2017a; TV2 Østjylland 2017) and as subjects of feelings who are given space to verbalise their hurt and outrage (Jørgensen

2017; Nielsen 2017b; Norup 2017; Rosenquist 2017b; TV2 Østjylland 2017). For example, in an article in *Midtjyllands Avis*, Yiming's teacher voices strong objections to the situation: 'I'm upset about the Ministry's decision to deport her, because it is totally unjustified' (Rosenquist 2017a) and a classmate adds: 'Yes, Yiming is actually really nice, so she should stay here, otherwise we'll get angry' (ibid). The representation of Yiming's white friends and supporters as political subjects – defined by their affective investments and vocal opposition to the deportation – stands in contrast to how Yiming herself is portrayed. While Yiming is never portrayed as emotionless, much of the reporting relies on visual representations in which her emotions are mediated through still images and footage of her crying (at the prospect of being deported) or smiling and hugging friends and family (after the retraction of her deportation). In this sense, she is primarily represented as (visual) evidence for the testimonies and evaluations made by white Danes. Even though these representations show Yiming as emotionally expressive, her fear and sadness are primarily framed as passive emotional reactions to a situation beyond her control and agency. The affective portrayal of Yiming thus aligns a white Danish public with Yiming's struggle for residency. The Danish public is invited to *feel* and empathise with Yiming, who is simultaneously defined by narratives (articulated by white Danes) of her exceptional ability to 'integrate' and images of her as the passive object of collective affect.

In this discursive and affective assemblage of media representations, Yiming is produced both as belonging in Denmark and as belonging to Denmark. In other words, belonging may here be analysed as the effect of the accumulated affects of love and devotion 'felt' by the Danish public. One could also say that while 'integration' functions as a premise for love, the love that is bestowed on Yiming by the white Danish public may itself be considered as performative for her 'integration'; the more she is loved by white Danes, the more 'integrated' she appears.

## Kjeld and the feeling of white loss

While the media reporting positions Yiming as the object of public affection, her stepfather, Kjeld, occupies a central role. Much of the reporting is centred around his emotional experience and political demands, as well as on his mediation of the feelings and thoughts of Yiming and the rest of the family to journalists and the wider public. In the reporting, Kjeld is portrayed as an exceptionally admirable citizen, both in regard to his efforts in defending Danish interests abroad as a navy officer – for which he has received medals from the Danish state (Nielsen 2017) – and for being a good, caring, and loving family man struggling to protect his family. In parts of the reporting, Kjeld's role is contrasted with Yiming's Chinese father's apparent lack of interest in caring for her (Gøttler 2017b). Some of the reporting position Kjeld as Yiming's father (rather than stepfather) and Kjeld himself refers to Yiming as his daughter (rather than stepdaughter) (Møldrup Sørensen 2017; Rosenquist & Husum 2017). In this way, Kjeld is portrayed as Yiming's 'real' father, replacing her seemingly absent and failing Chinese father. It may be argued that the image of the white Danish father as a saviour of children of colour is particularly powerful in



the Danish context, where transracial/national adoption has a long and idealised history (Myong & Trige Andersen 2015), and thus, that it imbues the claim for family reunification with an added moral legitimacy.

Apart from loving and caring for Yiming, Kjeld also relates himself emotionally towards Denmark, as state and community. While the reporting stresses the injustice of Yiming being separated from her family, much attention is also generated around Kjeld, who is framed as a Danish citizen being denied basic rights. This framing portrays Kjeld as directing his feelings ‘beyond the “private” realm of family and kin’ (Fortier 2010: 22) and towards the Danish state. This transforms him from being an affective *subject* to becoming an *affective citizen* (ibid.), thus making his feelings matter beyond his family. In a video clip, Kjeld states that ‘I have promised Yiming that she will never have to be separated from her mother again, then we will have to ... it cannot be true that I have to be expelled from my own country to protect Yiming and my family’ (Göttler 2017a). When asked how he feels about the situation, Kjeld replies: ‘I don’t feel good, I feel badly treated by my country, I represent my country in the best way on international missions, and then I find love overseas, and this is the appreciation [...] that I cannot live with my family, it is utterly grotesque, I cannot accept it’ (ibid.). Kjeld’s affective relation to Denmark is thus projected through a temporal and heroic framework in which Kjeld has proudly represented the Danish state as a navy officer in the past, but now feels unjustly treated and betrayed in the present due to the problems with securing reunification (Göttler 2017a; Nielsen 2017; Ravn 2018). While Yiming’s potential loss of family never disappears from the reporting, Kjeld’s loss is inscribed with a different value and scope; at stake for him is not ‘only’ the potential loss of a stepdaughter but, centrally, the loss of a national self-image in which Denmark automatically takes care of its citizens. Much of the reporting emphasises how Kjeld threatens to leave Denmark and return his medals if Yiming is not granted family reunification (Göttler 2017a, 2017b; Nielsen 2017; Søndergaard 2018a, 2018b). One example is an article published on *Ekstra Bladet*’s online platform on 30 May 2017, which features several photos of Kjeld posing in his uniform, holding his medals in his hand creating the impression that he is on the verge of returning them (Harder 2017). This is illustrative of how Kjeld emerges as a complex point of identification in the reporting: he is construed as a patriotic family man unfairly ‘punished’ by Danish immigration rules, and with a bruised emotional attachment to the notion of Denmark as a fair and decent nation. Yet he is also portrayed as a man of principle who is unafraid to turn away from the nation when it mistreats him. While the reporting suggests that the losses embodied by Yiming are contained within her family and the local community, Kjeld’s loss is also invoked as the loss of an idealised image of Denmark shared and negotiated in the public imaginary.

## ‘Decent when it matters’: white Danish love

In this section, we return to the question of how love operates in the reporting as well as to the striking differences in affective agency in terms of who is imagined as a capable

and trustworthy emotional subject whose feelings can be turned into political demands. In general, the media reporting emphasises how the white Danish public supports Yiming and thus how her application for family reunification has generated the sympathy of many Danes. In late May 2017, when Yiming's case was first circulated in the media, a group of (white Danish) classmates, parents of classmates, teachers, Yiming's stepfather, and local politicians voiced their support for Yiming. The media described the manifestation of this support in the form of petitions, letters sent to politicians, and personal testimonies (Husum 2017a, 2017b; Nielsen 2017a; Rosenquist 2017a, 2017b; Steenberg 2017; TV-MV 2017a). In these representations, (white) support for Yiming is imbued with a specific agency in its capacity as performative evidence of her belonging in/to Denmark. Yiming and her mother Xu Zhan are, however, portrayed quite differently; while not shown as subjects devoid of emotion, their affective expressions are mediated through a more passive register. Xu is mostly shown crying, being embraced by her husband, or herself embracing Yiming (Ballund 2017; Nielsen & Skou-Hansen 2017; TV2 Østjylland 2017); she is rarely interviewed or heard speaking. In this way, Xu's motherly love is portrayed as resigned and almost submissive in its despair, rather than a starting point for active intervention. The lack of agency ascribed to Xu and her love for Yiming is conspicuous considering that she is the one who has brought Yiming to Denmark and applied for family reunification. Yet, the representation of Yiming as worthy of compassion and love is not built on the 'evidence' of her mother's love and actions. Rather, it is articulated through representations of her as the object of white public affection. In this sense, it could be argued that what makes Yiming into an exceptional migrant is not her qualifications or personality traits as such, but her status as an object of love and affection for a white Danish public. The representation of Yiming as a lovable subject folds her into the nation, but this representation also plays a part in the constitution and regulation of the nation itself.

The question of Yiming's 'integration' is mediated through a cost-benefit framework in which inclusion in the welfare state is contingent upon human capital in the form of education and the capacity to become part of the labour force. An article in *Ekstra Bladet* quotes Kjeld's statement that 'In a few years, when she has an education, she will be a huge asset for Denmark' (Göttler 2017b). In this narrative 'education' is what makes Yiming into an 'asset' for the future prosperity of Danish welfare state biopolitics; in this sense her position as an object of love is closely tied to the notion of a model (middle-class) citizen, who will not become an economic burden or an ideological threat to the welfare state. The racialised logics of this narrative are imbricated in racial formation in Denmark, where anti-black and anti-Muslim racism dominate public discussions; in this context, Yiming's East Asian heritage, combined with her attachment to a white Danish stepfather, can be mobilised to differentiate her as already 'integrated' and thus as different from other immigrants. Yet, Yiming is also imbued with a different promise: As an object of white affection, she becomes symbolic of an image of the Danish nation as defined by a raceless inclusiveness in which racial difference is seen as without or beyond impact. This promise is most explicitly illustrated in a video interview broadcast in which a (white Danish) friend of Yiming states

that Yiming 'is just like my other friends, and one of my best friends, and I do not notice that she is not completely Danish' (Lysgaard 2018).

The representation of Yiming as the embodiment of an 'integrated' migrant who serves to secure the future of Denmark means that the love extended to Yiming can also be experienced and understood as love and concern for the nation. In this sense, the white Danish love that circulates in the media reporting may be conceptualised as an affective intervention or performative corrective – invested with the 'best interests' of the nation – aiming to subvert the immigration authorities' decision to deport Yiming. The distribution of love as a collective affect attached to white bodies enables these bodies to inhabit positions of moral superiority. In a commentary, journalist Susanne Niskanen argues that the many articles about Yiming's case published in the local paper *Midtjyllands Avis* 'emanate love and empathy and the wish to make a difference, which honestly speaking creates a good feeling' (Niskanen 2017). She also notes that it would have been inhumane and undignified if the local community had not banded together in support of Yiming's case: 'That's how we ordinary Danes really are, isn't it? We are decent when it really matters' (ibid.). Thus, while Niskanen celebrates how attention and support for Yiming generates good feelings, her commentary also claims that the case has revealed the 'true', inner core of Danish decency: a decency that shows itself when 'it really matters', that is, when white Danish citizens' right to live with their families is threatened.

## Restoring the nation: justice for white Danish citizens and 'good' migrants

The Danish authorities decided to temporarily suspend Yiming's deportation on 31 May 2017, approximately a week after the media brought attention to her case. Most of the reporting revolved around the immense relief and joy that followed from the decision, a point illustrated by numerous photos of a smiling Yiming. Yet, the reporting tended to accentuate the decision's emotional impact on her stepfather (and, to some extent, her mother) and the local community that supported her case (Stender Pedersen 2017a, 2017b; TV-MV 2017b). In an interview, Kjeld argued that 'common sense has prevailed' (Hejlskov Thomsen 2017), a perspective that can also be found in editorials and opinion pieces. An editorial from *Midtjyllands Avis* published immediately after the suspension of the deportation was critical of how Yiming's case had been handled, but it was also quick to draw the conclusion: 'A positive experience in the wake of Yiming's case is that democracy works, and that it is capable of calling a time-out with short notice when needed' (Krabbe 2017). Thus, the suspended deportation was celebrated not only as a victory for Yiming and her family, but also in a broader sense as a restoration of Danish democratic 'common sense'.

However, by early December 2017, it was reported that Yiming and her family were still awaiting a response from the immigration authorities. This prompted *Midtjyllands Avis'* online platform to publish an open letter penned by Kjeld. The letter is addressed directly to the then Danish Prime Minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, and it reiterates the point about Yiming's 'integration' and Kjeld's service for Denmark. However, it also explicitly appeals

to anti-immigration sentiments and racialised imagery that invokes a politics of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ migrants:

Do you ever, Mr Prime Minister, consider who gets to stay in Denmark and who we expel? We open our doors for convicted violent criminals and gang members, gypsy kings and Romanian criminals, and protect them through conventions, while ‘integrated’ and often highly educated immigrants are thrown out as if they posed a threat to national security. Is that ok? (Gaard-Frederiksen in Husum 2017c).

Utilising the differentiation of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ migrants, Kjeld frames the situation as an injustice being done to the nation (rather than to migrants): ‘STOP punishing love, education and integration – because that means punishing Denmark and the Danish population – Punish those who should be punished, if Denmark is not to lose its last ounce of self-respect!’ (ibid.). Here the figure of the ‘integrated’, ‘educated’ and ‘loving’ migrant emerges as a deserving and worthy migrant, whose potential exclusion is invoked as a punishment of the entire Danish population. In this logic securing national self-respect, as well as ‘integrity’ and ‘reputation’ (Gaard-Frederiksen in Husum 2017c), depends simultaneously on inclusion of the ‘good’ migrant *and* punishment of the ‘bad’ migrant. The differentiation of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ migrants echoes a broader tendency in the Nordic context to construe national belonging through parameters of deservingness and worthiness, as this is often illustrated by media reporting on individual cases (Horsti 2013; Horsti & Pellander 2015). Our analysis shows that the deservingness and worthiness projected onto Yiming is intimately tied to investments in Danishness as a national ideal and how alignment with this ideal functions as the premise of inclusion. A point illustrated by Kjeld’s letter in which he emphasises how the immigration system ultimately must work to secure Danishness: ‘A system for the sake of the system, not for the people? – not for the future of Denmark – not for love, not for humanity – not for DANISHNESS!’ (Gaard-Frederiksen in Husum 2017c). In Kjeld’s letter, the pressure to grant Yiming residency is thus articulated through affective appeals to restore a positive national self-image and a principle of justice that most of all will secure the rights of white Danish citizens to live with their families in Denmark.

## Concluding remarks

Our analysis shows that white love as an affective intervention – extended to Yiming and focused on securing her residency – hinges on narratives of Yiming as an exceptionally ‘integrated’ migrant. It is her status as an ‘integrated’ child that constitutes Yiming as an object worthy of (white) love. Yet to be loved by the Danish public also serves a performative function in the sense that this love works as ‘evidence’ of Yiming’s ‘integration’ in the news coverage. It is telling that in the media coverage, Yiming’s case is rarely compared to similar cases; the narrowness of the political demands raised in connection to her situation is wedded to exceptionalist politics in which the biopolitical logic of anti-immigration policies is left unchallenged and perhaps even strengthened. This may be best illustrated

by the letter Yiming's Danish stepfather addresses to the Danish Prime Minister, in which arguments for granting Yiming residency rely on biopolitical logics that effectively separates 'good' migrants (such as Yiming) from 'bad' migrants; a differentiation that serves as the guarantee of (exceptional) 'justice'.

At stake is not only the fate of Yiming; as pointed out, the public's opposition to Yiming's deportation and the support for her right to live with her family in Denmark must also be seen in the context of idealised notions of Denmark as a tolerant and decent welfare state. In this sense, the white public's eagerness to *feel* the injustice done to Yiming may be read as productive of efforts to restore and 'keep' a national(istic) ideal, and thus as imbricated in nation-building processes that ultimately work to restore an idealised image of the Danish nation in which 'human decency' is projected as a core value that hinders the separation of 'integrated' children and their parents. In this sense, the (white) love extended to Yiming is imbued with several promises: first, that Yiming's deportation can be reversed (and Yiming 'saved' from deportation), and second that the notion of a decent Danishness will be restored through the act of securing residency for her. Our analysis has shown that the public's love for Yiming may be conceptualised as a form of affective intervention. When tied to whiteness, love seems to carry a promise of affective agency that has the potential to reverse decisions relating to individual cases involving family reunification. Yet, this affective economy and its investment in securing social change through collective acts of feeling is ultimately sustained by exceptionalist politics that rely on differentiation between 'good' and 'bad' migrants that upholds white hegemony.

## Funding

Work on this publication has been funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research as part of the *Loving Attachment: Regulating Danish Love Migration* research project.

## Notes

1. We refer to Liu Yiming by her first name Yiming. This reflects how she is portrayed in most of the media coverage.
2. The 'potential for successful integration' is a requirement of Danish legislation on family reunification of children with a parent living in Denmark. The requirement is part of the Danish Aliens Act, where it can be found as §9, stk. 20 (Udlændinge- og Integrationsministeriet 2019). For an English version of the substance of the requirement, see Udlændingestyrelsen 2018.
3. Others are, for example, the '24-year rule' (implemented in 2002) and the 'immigration test' (implemented in 2010).
4. On its implementation in 2004, the requirement of successful integration applied to all children regardless of age. However, in 2012, it was modified to exempt children under the age of 6, if they applied within 2 years from the point of time where the conditions for

family reunification were met by the parent. In 2016, it was modified again, now to apply to all children above the age of 8. The requirement was officially intended to stop parents from sending children on prolonged stays abroad (in Danish: genopdragelsesrejser), but in fact, the requirement was used to hinder family reunification of children. From 2005 to 2010, 796 children under the age of 15 were deemed ‘unable to integrate’ by the Danish authorities, and their applications for family reunification were subsequently rejected (DR P1 Dokumentar, 8 September 2011).

5. In the Danish language version of the requirement, the Danish phrase ‘en sådan tilknytning’ (literally meaning: ‘such an attachment’) (§ 9, stk. 20 in the Danish Alien Act, Udlændinge- og Integrationsministeriet 2019) is used for the English term ‘sufficient ties’ (Udlændingestyrelsen 2018). Hence, the requirement can be seen as a continuation of the attachment requirement that formed part of Danish legislation on family reunification of spouses from 2001 to 2018. It was stipulated that in order to be granted family reunification, a couple’s combined attachment to Denmark had to be equally strong as (since 2002 modified to stronger than) to another country (Bissenbakker 2019 for a discussion of the attachment requirement).
6. Similar cases have caught the attention of the Danish media and public. Several of these cases have centralised girls of East Asian heritage being deported or threatened thereof, and with their white Danish stepfathers playing a central part in the reporting. One example is the case of the 12-year-old Aphinya Pechmuang, who was denied residence due to the integration requirement in November 2017, and 13-year-old Atcharapan ‘Mint’ Yangyai who was denied residence in March 2018. Other cases, for example, that of the 15-year-old boy Chittisak ‘Birdie’ Khunakhun, who was denied residence in March 2018, have not received the same level of media and public attention.
7. We refer to Kjeld Gaard-Frederiksen by his first name Kjeld, which aligns with how he is portrayed in most of the media coverage.
8. The newspaper articles are listed with their Danish headlines; we refer to the reference list where all headlines are listed with an English translation.

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