No count! BIPOC artists counteracting “fair” representation and systemic racial loneliness in higher education in the arts

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ABSTRACT
Art in public space is fundamentally determined by who has access to the artworld. At the entrance to the artworld of today—the art academy—resides an ideal of global mobility that relates to cognitive capitalism and competitiveness but also to the repeating of rationales of white privilege and a hidden structural racism. By analysing how Higher Education in the Arts in Denmark awards “free” mobility and encourages internationalization, following the neoliberal European policies of the Bologna Process in their aim of competitiveness while at the same time having no official strategies in relation to racial diversity and recruitment, I find biopolitical lines of demarcation and structural racism within the foundational infrastructures of the Danish artworld. Based on the findings of my analysis of both educational policy documents and understandings of “fair” representation of BIPOCs in the arts in Denmark, I demonstrate how racial loneliness resides as an affective response to experiences of structural racism in the infrastructures of the arts. I suggest that racial loneliness is an interdependent affect and a product of educational documents, reforms and policies. This assumption is accompanied by the example of the artists’ collective FCNN, stressing how BIPOC student Eliyah Mesayer is isolated and subjected to tokenism in the classroom of the art academy. Informed by the increasing number of separatist BIPOC collectives offering an ongoing infrastructural performance of being “too many”, the article ends with a speculation on how to organize bodies otherwise in the infrastructures of the artworld by exceeding rationales of reasonable and adequate representability.

Questions of colonial legacy in the arts have polarized the public debate in Denmark since a plaster cast copy of a bust of Frederik V (1723–1766), one of the founders of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, was thrown into the harbour in November 2020 by the group Anonymous Visual Artists. The group accompanied the sinking of the statue with the following statement:

By sinking Frederik V in the canal, we want to articulate the ways in which the colonial era is invisible but still has direct consequences for marginalized people inside and outside the walls of Charlottenborg [the name of the art academy, red.]. We want an art world that relates to and takes responsibility not just for the acts of the past but also for the ways in which colonialism is still dripping down the walls.¹ (my translation)

This event can be seen in the context of the statues being toppled in public spaces that accompanied the Black Lives Matter protests across the world in 2020. In Denmark specifically, the sinking of the bust points to the Danish engagement in the transatlantic slave trade that was initiated during the rule of Frederik V (Buckley 2021). The event aligns with a string of decolonizing critiques that took place in Denmark in 2020—from red paint being poured over a statue of the Danish-Norwegian colonizer Hans Egede placed in Nuuk, Greenland, to the graffiti saying “Racist Fish” written on the statue of the Little Mermaid in Copenhagen harbour (Enge 2020; Henley 2020).

The founding of the art academy in Copenhagen—or the “white castle” as it has been called by critical voices (Friemuth 2020)—was dependent on an economy based on Danish participation in the transatlantic slave trade and Danish colonization with the sugar plantations in what is now the US Virgin Islands.² In the past decade, Higher Education in Denmark has been continuously criticized by collectively organized students, artists and alumnae for not being attentive to questions of accessibility, structural racism and the repercussions of colonial legacies, both in the composition of students, the absence of channels for complaint and the blind spots in the curriculum. In 2017–2018, the University of Copenhagen had a case of complaint at The Mediation and Complaints

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Handling Institution for Responsible Business Conduct. The complaint was raised by the students’ organization FRONT and regarded the lack of due diligence and the absence of complaints channels regarding discrimination at the university. Another example from 2017 was the Feminist Collective with No Name (FCNN) calling out professor Rolf Nowotny at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts for blackfacing in a performance in the Zoo in Odense. FCNN suggested, in the public media, that rector Sanne Kofod Olsen should dismiss Nowotny (Zia 2017). In a Nordic context, the critique of the whiteness norm at the art academies—found in the art decorating the walls of the academy in Oslo and in the seeming “neutrality” of the white exhibition walls—has also led to several public debates on how to decolonize the art academy (Arnesen, Schei, and Traedal 2020; Brown Island 2018; Danbolt and Schmidt 2021).

This article suggests focusing on the invitation by the group Anonymous Visual Artists to a debate on how to decolonize the infrastructures of the artworld and specifically in the art academy. Methodologically, the article focuses on an imbalance between structural conditions and feelings: it cross-reads the statistics of representation in the art academies and the policies of internationalization in Higher Education in the Arts with the affect of what I will term “racial loneliness” expressed through a collection of utterances by BIPoC artists.1 The sources at hand are thus a collection—inspired by genre of the collection of everyday experiences often employed in affect theory and feminist literature (Lorde 1982; Ahmed 2007; Rankine 2004, 2014, 2020) showing diverse iterations of repeated patterns of racialization—across data and feelings: statistics on admittance to the Danish art academies, policy documents on Higher Education in the EU, artworks performed in public space, and utterances in the recent debate on decolonizing the art academy in Denmark. I write as a Danish, racialized white scholar coming from the field of Cultural Studies and Performance Studies, informed by scholarship from primarily Black and feminist studies but also educational research and critiques proposed by BIPoC artists in Denmark, analysing their affects produced within the conditions and practices of Danish Higher Education in the Arts.

I start out by providing two sections on structural conditions: firstly, I look at the representational composition of the classroom in the Danish art academies, and secondly, I consider the disadvantages of the neoliberal policies in Higher Education in the Arts in Europe, and in particular the promise of “internationalization” of the Bologna Process. I seek to understand the loaded internationalization agenda—the promise of international competitiveness in Higher Education through the integration of students from different countries, albeit with the focus primarily on the circulation of students in the European region—within the infrastructures of the arts themselves, and the granting to certain bodies and ways of moving more “credit” than others. In the third section, I define the affect “racial loneliness” and analyse utterances of this affect in the art academy by, amongst others, the artist Eliyah Mesayer in an artwork by Feminist Collective with No Name (FCNN).

In conclusion, I speculate on the performative organization of “too many” bodies in BIPoC artists’ collectives in Denmark as a response to racial loneliness. Thinking with iterations within Black theory of the concept of “consent not to be a single being,” first theorized by Édouard Glissant and later echoed by Fred Moten (2017), I discuss misconceptions of benevolent, supposedly “fair” or “reasonable” representation in Higher Education in the Arts and suggest anti-racist practices less bound to numbers of representation. Thus, through a mixed-source collection on systemic racial loneliness this article seeks to contribute to an understanding of how transnational mobility, filtered through neoliberal educational policy, infuses affective responses performed by BIPoC artists in public space.

Who is in the classroom?

In her book Death of a Discipline (2003), the professor of Literary Theory Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak rightly questions who is in the classroom when she is teaching Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own. When revising one’s teaching and the future of an academic discipline, Spivak writes about the future fate of Comparative Literature and calls for an interdisciplinarity of Cultural Studies, saying that when teaching not only the curriculum and the canon must be revised but the composition of the students in the classroom should also be considered. Likewise, I might add that the composition of the teaching, administrative and directorial staff in education has to be reflected on as well, otherwise a whiteness norm—an excluding “normality” of whiteness—in Higher Education is most likely to continue.

How can we understand who is present and who can be heard in the classroom of the art academies in Denmark? It is important here to ask who is present, both who is teaching and who is at the centre (or not) of the narratives and documents being circulated in and around the art academies. I focus here on racializing structures—structures creating hierarchies between races—and affects informed by the research field of Critical Race Studies in the Nordic region. I understand race here as a dynamic and relational marker that is experienced differently (Andreassen and Myong 2017). Race is thus both visual marker and a performative category being ascribed to and
given situated value. The process of producing race and of putting races into a hierarchy is termed racialization. A person does not have a race but is racialized. Therefore the term “racialized” will also be employed here in relation to people who are identified as racialized white, brown or black, when race plays an implicit, explicit or even silenced role.

Representation and discussion of race can be seen as a ghostly matter in Denmark: something that is silenced or replaced by terms such as ethnicity and migrant descent (ibid., Hvenegaard-Lassen and Staunæs 2021). Unlike Sweden, where governmental recruitment strategies in Higher Education explicitly stress inclusion and equality,⁴ in Denmark guidelines on representation and diversity in Higher Education in the Arts are not on the government’s cultural policy agenda. Therefore, “good” and “fair” representation becomes a matter of institutional strategies, or even benevolence. Recently, as a critique of the happening by the “Anonymous Visual Artists”, the former rector of the art academy in Copenhagen, Mikkel Bogh, used the procedure of matching the numbers of representation of “migrants” in society at large as a measure: “When I was rector, between 10 and 15% of the students had an ethnic minority background—do they [Anonymous Visual Artists, red.] think this number is too low? Do they protest against discriminatory practices towards brown students? What do they want? It is unclear [to me].” (Schmidt and Heltoft 2020, my translation). Bogh is here suggesting a “fair” representation in education as one that mirrors the percentage of “migrants” in society; the “diversity quota” was fulfilled during his time as rector. He thereby avoids analysing the artwork of the sunken bust, avoids reflecting on affects of racialization or colonialism, or any speculation as to how the academy could possibly be decolonized. Instead, he recenetrers the discussion on his own work: his own achievements in terms of “fair” numeric representation as the former rector during the period 2005–2014.

In Denmark, 14% of the population are “migrants and descendants of migrants” (wording and numbers from Danmarks Statistik 2021, 7). If representation inside the art institution should mirror the societal representation, as Bogh suggests, then 14% of the students in the art academy should be “migrants and descendants of migrants” too. But when it comes to the exact numbers of students who are identified as having the status of migrant or of migrant descent—that is, not born with Danish citizenship according to the statistics—it seemingly goes overtly “well” with the representation, and even better than in the time when Bogh was rector. In the fine arts academy in Copenhagen, there has been a steep change in representation of “migrants and descendants of migrants”, from 14% in 2010 to 40% in 2020 (Danmarks Statistik 2020). This shows, first and foremost, a remarkable rise in the admission of students from outside Denmark—something I will connect in the next section to the idea of the “internationalization” of the educational landscape. However, the statistics tell us nothing about the representation of race.

Looking more closely at the statistics, there is a division between “Western” and “non-Western” students—a division of status employed in Danish jurisdiction since 2002,⁵ and yet another variation of not talking about race. The admittance of “non-Western” students shows a significant shift in 2016: in 2010, only 2 out of 32 students admitted at the master’s degree level were of “non-Western” background; in 2016, this went up to 15 of 53 students, while in 2020 19 students of “non-Western” background out of a total of 52 students were admitted to the art academies. The numbers show an increase of “non-Western students”. A high admission of “non-Western” students could give an image of diversity in the academy. But the numbers say nothing about racial diversity, and besides BIPOCs are not necessarily migrants from “non-Western” countries. As I will show in the third section, the affects of racial loneliness amongst BIPOCs do not correspond with the high numbers of “non-Western” students.

The admittance of “non-Western” students at the art academy in Copenhagen has not guaranteed diversity in management or teaching staff or in the curriculum.⁶ In my former research, in which as part of an analysis of the implementation of the Bologna Process in Higher Education in the Arts I looked at graduation works in several art academies in Germany, Denmark and Norway, I repeatedly observed a lack of non-white staff and a lack of a critical mass of BIPOC peers (Schmidt 2019). Although the graduating students have had an explicit desire to work artistically with racialization, the BIPOCs students have found no allies of colour to collaborate with in the peer group, nor BIPOCs in the audience. The structurally “lonelyized” position of the BIPOC student costs affective work, often not being allowed to be either oneself as an individual or sometimes being simply obsolete. BIPOC students are, rather, often tokenized and expected to “represent” a whole group of people of colour.⁷

In diversity work in cultural institutions, a recent shift in the discourse is to move away from the measure of representation in numbers to the concept of critical diversity (Wiegand and Vitting-Seerup 2019). Critical diversity is both a celebration of differences in institutions, but also “requires an analysis of exclusion and
discrimination, and it challenges hegemonic notions of colorblindness and meritocracy” (Herrring and Henderson 2011, 630). This involves an analysis across the infrastructures of the arts and Higher Education: of the power structures in the institutions, the policies they rely on, the neoliberal ideals of “study” and even the exclusive notion of the artwork. Here, the attention economy becomes crucial: the representation mirrors not the composition in society but what is considered worthwhile and given priority in our historical present. Sara Ahmed writes about this attention that it is drawing lines and distributing value in the population: “Organisations can be considered as modes of attention: what is attended to can be thought of as what is valued. Attention is how some things come into view and others not” (Ahmed 2012, 30). In the case of the former rector Bogh’s proposal of adequate and “fair” representation as mirroring the numbers of “migrants” outside the academy, this can be seen as an example of reactionary diversity work. The lack of addressing of racism has repercussions on the general structural ignorance towards discussing racialization in Higher Education in Denmark. In a debate on prayer rooms at the University of Copenhagen in 2017, the rector talked about such spaces as spaces not for diversity, religious or racial differences, but for the enhancement of international competitiveness through spaces of rest and meditation (Hvenegård-Lassen and Staunæs 2021). A recent example of silencing racism can be found in a report on challenges in Danish Higher Education in the Arts (Kulturministeriet 2021). The report does not—despite the recent heated public debates on colonialism and racism in the art academy as highlighted in the introduction—mention racism as a problem related to the wellbeing of students. The report finds it necessary to build secure complaint channels regarding “sexism, bullying and problems of well-being” (Kulturministeriet 2021), but racism is not mentioned. When racism is not listed as a problem in the policy document, but there is an otherwise flourishing public debate about exactly racism at the art academy in Copenhagen, racism becomes silenced, hidden, or what Kirsten Hvenegård-Lassen and Dorthe Staunæs have called “a ghost” (2021).

Although the classrooms in the art academy in Copenhagen have become greatly more diverse with regard to descendence in the recent five years, there is a risk of racial loneliness when institutions have no language for racism, nor any official conduct or strategies for the recruitment of students and staff. As I will show in the following section, this absence of attention to racism in otherwise “inclusive” policies is strangely echoed in the eager focus on “internationalization” in Danish Higher Education in the Arts, and is particularly supported by the neoliberal focus on “free” movement in the Bologna Process.

The promise of internationalization

The European reform of Higher Education named the Bologna Process (1998–) aims to make education comparable across EU countries in order to provide job mobility and cultural exchange. It was implemented in Higher Education in the Arts in Denmark in the period 2010–2018. Besides structuring education into a 3-year bachelor and a 2-year master’s qualification, two main goals of the Bologna Process are mobility and internationalization in Higher Education. A goal formulated for 2020 by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is that at least 20% of the graduating bachelor’s degree students in Europe will have spent a term abroad. The assumption in the Bologna Process is that mobility is good for all students. However, the impetus for this mobility and internationalization is not the well-being or development of the single student nor diversity in the classroom. The main motivation is the competitiveness of European knowledge production on a global scale. As the operating body of higher education in the EU, the EHEA states: world-wide degree of attraction”. (Working Group on Mobility and Internationalisation in EHEA 2012)

Students within the EU and its partnering countries can go on exchange at partner institutions and receive additional support from the Erasmus subsidies. There is no need to argue that studying in other educational contexts abroad can be both artistically inspiring and enlightening. Also, the objectives for mobility through the Erasmus+ Programme are continuously being developed to stimulate “cooperation, quality, inclusion and equity, excellence, creativity and innovation.” This formulation can be seen as broadening the reasons to move, albeit with the focus remaining on the improvement of career possibilities for the individual and on the strengthening of European identity. I read the motivation for mobility and internationalization coming from the policymaking body as a capitalist argument of competitiveness through neoliberal measurement. Accordingly, in its 2020 annual report, the art academy in Copenhagen outlines internationalization as a goal and states its desire to have exchanges with “the best” partner institutions abroad in order to position the academy alumnae in “the best possible
way” in the global art scene (Kunstakademiet 2020, 19).

While I am here considering the conflicting lines between internationalization and racialization in Higher Education in the Arts in Denmark in particular, the critique of neoliberalism in Higher Education has been greatly theorized in the past decade. Neoliberalism can be understood through the political theorist Wendy Brown’s idea of the “economisation of all spheres” (2015), where everything can be accounted for and seen as possible investment in the future. Neoliberal policymaking can be read as a way of reorganizing educational sites to be sites of profit and entrepreneurial potential.13 Within the neoliberal rationale, mobility during education is also something that can be economized: the student is rewarded by Erasmus grants when moving in this supposedly international frame. To be international and on the move as an art student is, in other words, a privilege of the student who is inscribed in an Erasmus institution of Higher Education.14 While the student is “rewarded” for their ability to move in these infrastructures, the educational institution also counts its rate of exchange students per year (Kunstakademiet 2020) —and the partner institutions in other European countries are mentioned as attributes on the homepage.15 Everybody counts their merits in the infrastructures of mobility within the Bologna Process.

As the quote above indicates, the motivation for mobility and internationalization within the Bologna Process is to strengthen Europe’s position globally. Structurally, mobility is distributed, and also withdrawn, by the power of the institutions in the nation state and—in the case of the EU—its allies. The EU has 27 member states, but the Erasmus network includes 49 countries altogether. The Bologna Process thus promotes and governs a mobility inside the Erasmus network and strengthens the competitiveness of European Higher Education and its allies, but it also produces outsiders: those who cannot move; those who do not come from one of the 49 member countries of the Erasmus network. In his article “Decolonizing the university: New directions” (2016), the political theorist Achille Mbembe used the word zoning to describe the underside of the competitive alliances in the neoliberal, global universities:

This new era of denationalization or transnationalization is also an era of open global competition. Competition has become a normal and widely accepted phenomenon among universities throughout the world today.

With competition comes something we should call zoning. Zoning is what happens to the losers in the unfolding global competition. For a university to be ‘zoned’ is like being parked in a reserve – to become what we used to call here a bush university. An entirely new era, that of global Apartheid in higher education, is unfolding. (Mbembe 2016, 38)

Let me be clear: Mbembe was writing in 2016 from a Sub-Saharan perspective on the global competitiveness across universities, yet he does not directly analyze the effects of the Bologna Process. Following Mbembe’s analysis of the zoning of some by the privileging of others, the mobility imperative in the Bologna Process can be seen as a biopolitical, colonial rationality that strengthens and prioritizes the movement of certain bodies over others and avoiding a mix between the lines of the continents. While the Erasmus student is on the move, other students are zoned on a global scale. The Erasmus+ Programme within the Bologna Process privileges the students from the Erasmus network in a global university competition.

The internationalization agenda in the Bologna Process could be interpreted as a line of global inclusion, but in practice it is a demarcating line. In other words, neoliberal policies in the Bologna Process fail attempts of inclusion at the advantage of competitiveness. Professor of education and social justice Kalwant Bhopal has, in a British context before Brexit, concluded that “within a neoliberal context [of Higher Education], policy making has failed in its attempts to champion inclusion and social justice, and in doing so has further marginalized the position of black and minority ethnic groups” (Bhopal 2018, 4). She points out how, despite Tony Blair’s “widening participation agenda” from 1999 attempting and succeeding in increasing the numbers of racialized black and minoritized students in Higher Education, elite universities in the UK are still dominated by racialized white students (Bhopal 2018, 89). Inclusion, I would suggest, is surpassed by competitiveness—both globally and racially. An analysis of the understanding of inclusion in the Bologna Process in the light of neoliberalism is provided by the scholar in education and social policy, Iryna Kushnir. Inclusion-related action lines in the Bologna Process are, according to Kushnir’s reading, to be found in the concepts of “lifelong learning,” “student-centred learning” and “the social dimension,” all of which are tied to the neoliberalist discourse on competitiveness and employability (Kushnir 2020, 495–497). A gap in the use of the vocabulary of inclusivity in the Bologna Process is the expanding of the notion of “underrepresented groups,” although at some point it is linked to “intercultural understanding” (ibid, 498). The fluffiness of these terms only invites speculation as to whether they mean the inclusion of members of the LGBTQIA communities, gender equality or any
attention to racialization. Kushnir concludes that the Bologna Process "dovetails with symbolic policies more than with material policies" (ibid, 498–499) and thus lacks precise suggestions for the implementation of inclusion targets. Thinking with Kushnir’s sense of finding “inclusion-related action lines,” it could be said that Higher Education in the Arts in Denmark—and cultural policy more broadly—accentuates inclusion through internationalization and proxies such as admission of “non-Western” students and complaint channels against “bullying.” However, work with diversity and inclusion does not explicitly figure in the yearly reports on the level of faculty staff, new pedagogies or changes to the curriculum.

I want to sum up on the internationalization agenda of the Bologna Process in Higher Education as presented through Mbembe, Bhopal and Kushnir: rather than supporting diversity, it enhances neoliberal competitiveness and creates zoned regions in the global landscape of knowledge production. Likewise, the attention to diversity in the Bologna Process prioritizes competitiveness and employability rather than focusing on sexuality, gender and race. Inclusion and diversity work, in a Danish context, equals a high admission of “non-Western” students and internationalization through mobility, and becomes part and parcel of the neoliberal implementation. Thereby, race is—in the Danish cultural policies on Higher Education in the Arts—silenced at the structural level of documents as well as in the agendas of recruitment. In the following, I take a closer look at the Danish BIPOCs’ collective FCNN, in collaboration with the artist Eliyah Mesayer, and their portraying of racial loneliness. I suggest that the artists offer a portrait of the loneliness of the BIPOC student who is structurally undocumented and ignored, both statistically in the art academy and discursively in the policies of Higher Education in the Arts.

Racial Loneliness

FCNN is a collective initiated by the artists Dina El Kaisy Friemuth, Lil B. Wachmann and filmmaker Anita Beikpour, working across performance, statements, interventions and video. FCNN was founded while the three artists were studying at or graduating from different Danish Higher Education in the Arts institutions in 2016—the year, by the way, when the admission of “non-Western” students in the art academies increased from 2 to 15 per year!

The founding moment during study and graduation time and the affiliation with the academies is, according to their self-written biography, not central to FCNN, yet I perceive that the loneliness of the BIPOC student during their artistic education is an affective experience that the group both implicitly and explicitly refer to. I would even suggest that the racial loneliness of the BIPOC art student might be one of the affective bonds of this collective. In a conversation on the founding of FCNN during their studies at the art academy in Copenhagen, Dina El Kaisy Friemuth stresses the necessity of collective organization in order to reduce the individual vulnerability of racialized black and brown art students: “I needed to organize. I needed to get some people with me, because it’s really tough to do political work, and when you do it alone it really like [sic] crushes you.” El Kaisy Friemuth further explains the experience of racial violence and what it means to be “crushed” publicly by exemplifying it with the sudden death of the Palestinian-Danish author Yahya Hassan (1995–2020). Hassan had been subjected to massive media attention and become embroiled in a scandal for his critique of both Danish structural racism and domestic and psychic violence in immigrant families: “We just saw that you had a really big loss in Denmark, a person who has been crushed […] you get so much shit when you talk about these things and you need to have a community around you, […] a safe environment and somebody who has your back.” What El Kaisy Friemuth argues here is that the public Danish discourse can be scapegoating and intimidating for BIPOCs to engage in, when individual artists become targets for racializing public identification.

While the underrepresentation of BIPOCs in the art academy, in the museum, in the media and in public debate are explicitly addressed in FCNN’s works and statements, the group also works to counteract loneliness though their collaborative formats—such as the media platform FCNNNews, also known as “Fuck CNN News”. In FCNNNews Episode 1 (2018), a member of the collective interviews the art student Eliyah Mesayer, a visual artist with Bedouin and Kuwaiti ancestry who works with her status of being stateless and who at that time was a student at the Jutland Art Academy in Aarhus, Denmark. Mesayer puts the situation of the lonely BIPOC art student into words:

You take my spirit when you befriend me for my colour and you don’t really see me. Or, that I am filling up a folder in the institution. That you don’t recognize my loneliness of being different, the only woman of colour. (Eliyah Mesayer in FCNNNews Episode 1 (2018), 11:05—11:42)

Mesayer expresses an experience of being tokenized: to represent “diversity” in the institution but as an empty signifier and without company. She experiences loneliness both as the only woman of colour in the classroom at the art academy in Aarhus and also as reduced into a generalized BIPOC-
identity—an incorporated token for the institution—without a personal history.

There are several ways to theorize the phenomenon of systemic racial loneliness. Besides loneliness being a reoccurring phenomenon experienced by the neoliberal artist subjected to the pressure of competitiveness, flexibility and individualized production (Kunst 2015; Verwoert 2014; Schmidt 2019), it is also experienced in a racialized version by individual BIPoC students in Higher Education in the Arts. A BIPoC student can potentially experience a double loneliness, due to the demands of both mobility and internationalization in education and structural racism. The first form of loneliness is due to neoliberal policy: the individualization of students through study regulations that enhance “responsabilization” (Brown 2015) and professionalization (Harney and Moten 2013). These structural conditions force the individual away from a continuous sociality of study and friendship. The sociality left behind due to “free” artistic mobility are friendships, family, the BIPoC community or even the peer group from the art academy. The second form of loneliness is a result of the mixture of racial underrepresentation and an inability to talk about racism and colonial heritage in the art institution (Warner 2018; Thorsen 2020; Friemuth 2020; Danbolt and Skovmøller 2020): the feelings of not matching the norm, and of being a tokenized representative embedded in a racializing milieu, are experienced alone, in isolation.

This latter form of loneliness, being isolated in the classroom of the art institution, is what is addressed as a racial loneliness and reflected by Mesayer as the BIPoC art student in FCNNews. “The spirit” taken away, Mesayer unfolds in the interview, is a plurality of stories of difference and ancestry that she carries with her; stories which are not visible, beyond the skin. She calls these invisibilized stories and identities her “ghosts”—a wording also used in academia to characterize the silencing of race (Hvenegård-Lassen and Staunæs 2021). Ghosts are invisibilized and do not count in the art academy where Mesayer’s identity is reduced to her representability. In the art academy, her experiences as racialized and her post-migratory narratives do not fit the concept of internationalization. “I’m walking around with half a horde,” she says (FCNN 2018, 8:35–8:42), when talking about her “ghosts.” Visually, FCNN adds cartoonish ghosts around Mesayer in the frame: she is artistically presented in a kind of plenum, accompanied by ghosts from her migratory past as a nomad in the desert. The “horde” is too difficult to administer and account for in a neoliberal art institution, one might think.

When Mesayer feels tokenized as a student representable for all “minoritized” students, “filling up a folder in the institution,” she is reduced to a representation of diversity—one of the morally mandatory tick boxes of contemporary higher education—but not with a lived experience of racialization or a personal story of migration. Mesayer addresses the institution as a co-producer, interpellating it with race: “You take my spirit when you befriend me for my colour.” She thereby stresses how her racial loneliness is co-produced by the infrastructures—the folder and the relations—in the art academy, confirming how race is a performative and interrelated category (Andreasen and Myong 2017).

Thinking about loneliness in relation to mobility as internationalization, I would suggest that the affective loneliness of the BIPoC student is post-migratory. I deploy the term post-migratory descriptively here—an experience that comes after travelling,21 in relation to travels in the past, prior to the time of studying, in childhood, as for Mesayer, or by travels made by ancestors—whereas the loneliness experienced by Erasmus students is in relation to present travels. The asymmetry between the infrastructural support of Erasmus mobility, and the lack of material policies on inclusion in the Bologna Process, urges me to see this as a constituting line of demarcation that, in the words of David Lloyd, “separate[s] human subjects from subjected humans” (Lloyd 2018, 2). Such a line of demarcation between explicitly appreciated and even rewarded mobility, and then structurally underprioritized (post)mobility, can be understood as division made with affective biopower, a line separating the population—here, art students—into sub-groups and adding differentiated value to them. In the context of affective biopolitics, such a line of demarcation indexing whose way of living is more valued can be understood as racism (Mbembe 2003; Ahmed 2007; da Silva 2007; Lloyd 2018). Lines of demarcation and systemic racial loneliness are co-produced between several individuals. Or, said in another way, racism is a social and infrastructural production. The normativity and racializing lines of demarcation in imperatives of internationalization and mobility in Higher Education in the Arts—motivated and funded by the infrastructures of the Bologna Process and the lack of guidelines in diversity work in Danish cultural policy—are displayed when FCNN profiles the racial loneliness of the single BIPoC student in the classroom. The artists in FCNN ask the fundamental question: who is able to enter the art academy and the artworld?

After analysing how the art academy and the Bologna Process co-produce racial loneliness by tokenizing the BIPoC student in the classroom and assimilating her post-migratory “ghosts” by promoting “international” mobility, I want to end this section by reflecting on how to theorize racial loneliness. I will include a little detour to a collection of experiences with racialization from outside the academy in order to understand why racial loneliness is systemic. American poet Claudia Rankine’s literary

21. Mesayer is talking about “ghosts” in her interview with FCNN. FCNN, “Mesayer, solo art-lobbying event at Skagens Festival,” Skagens Festival, 2018.
works Don’t let me be lonely (2004), Citizen (2014) and Just Us (2020), for example, offer a collection of everyday examples of racial loneliness in dominantly white spaces in the US. Scenes of loneliness due to racialization are set at dinner parties, in private schools, in the theatre, on aeroplanes. The interdependent production of loneliness is here between the one racialized black person and the numerous racialized white persons in public and semi-public spaces. This composition of the one “othered” and the numerous “same” is not just a sign of hybridity, but a repetitive asymmetry: a specific variation of “the complicated entanglement of togetherness in difference” (Ang 2003) that is based on racialization. Through the literary genre of the collection of everyday experiences—a genre known throughout feminist affect theory, exercised from Audre Lorde’s Sister Outsider (1984) to Sara Ahmed in Living a Feminist Life (2017)—loneliness becomes recognizable as something repetitive and systemic: loneliness appears and reappears as interdependent affect.

Claudia Rankine refers explicitly to the philosopher Jill Stauffer’s notion of “ethical loneliness” in order to describe the experience of being black in spaces defined by whiteness (Rankine 2020, 202, 323). Ethical loneliness is a concept Stauffer extracts primarily from Jewish experiences of isolation and exclusion from humanity by the deprivation of rights and possibilities of living:

Ethical loneliness is the isolation one feels when one, as a violated person or as a person of a persecuted group, has been abandoned by humanity, or by those who have power over one’s life possibilities […] So ethical loneliness is the experience of having been abandoned by humanity compounded by the experience of not being heard. (Stauffer 2015, 1)

What Stauffer’s concept offers is the attention to loneliness as an interdependent affect and a product of official laws, rules, measurements. Stauffer writes about existential experiences of loneliness and the ethical abandonment of life lived by Jewish people on their own terms, exemplified in the experience of abandonment by the thinkers Jean Améry and Emmanuel Levinas. When I employ loneliness in this context, however, it is about both not being heard—not being taken serious in official documents when it comes to racism, for example—and being “heard” wrongly or only partly, in a reducing way—as for example, when being subjected to tokenism. Secondly, the systemic loneliness I describe might be an ethical loneliness, too, a feeling of total abandonment—but I focus on it here primarily as produced by institutional policies and documents, rather than by humanity at large.

Collecting examples of systemic racial loneliness in Higher Education in the Arts—with FCNN and Mesayer as examples—could, from a critical stance, be seen as a tokenization in itself: comparing and insisting on affects of “suffering” rather than methodologically asking for more stories, more “ghosts” to complicate the representability of the BIPOC art students. Therefore, instead of staying with the focus on individual artists in racializing structures, I suggest ending this article with “providing company” for those who are systemically racialized and lonely, by recognizing and highlighting the organization of “being many” in BIPOC collectives in Denmark. With this, I show how the affect of racial loneliness in the infrastructures of the art world has been responded to with new ways of organizing amongst BIPOC artists—a way of organizing that offers artistic negotiations of state memory and remembering in public space.

On being too many

When statues of colonizers are toppled around the world and a bust of a Danish king is sunk in Copenhagen harbour, the role of artistic representations in public space is brought into question (Preciado 2020). This article has not asked who can or should be seen and remembered on the socles of the public squares, but who and what can possibly make the social sculpting of the future in the Danish art scene? Will the silenced ghosts of colonialism and racism keep haunting the artworld?

At the entrance to the artworld of today—the art academy—there reside policies relating to the global mobility of students, to cognitive capitalism, employability and competitiveness, but the absence of the addressing of race and racism in the art academy in reforms and policy documents also supports white privilege and the continuation of structural racism. There is thus a structural “ghosting” of race in Higher Education of the Arts in Denmark. Taking the experiences of BIPOC students into account, as I have done here, it seems that affects of being alone and underrepresented report differently than the numbers of admitted students being “migrants and descendants of migrants.” Working with representation in Higher Education in the Arts cannot, I argue, find a solution solely in having a certain percentage of students identified as “migrants” that mirrors the percentage of “migrants” in Danish society, since this can potentially still repeat a dominance of racialized white norms. Both the curriculum and the composition of faculty staff are key to any change if the “ghosts” of the cultures invited are not to evaporate. A step towards anti-racist art academies in Denmark—maybe less than a promise from my racialized white side of decolonization—might be to start with bringing some strategic attention to the racialized composition of the classroom, but also to the infrastructures of the art academy; the symbolic and material policies on “inclusion”, the strategic ignorance of race in official documents and their implicit, racist lines of demarcation.
The answer to experiences of racism and racial loneliness is not just a matter of numbers, since the ghost of race continues to be hidden in the infrastructures. But art students and artists might offer a strategy of self-organization that could counteract racial loneliness: a suggestion of strategic separatism (Spivak 1987) has been practised by BIPOC artists’ collectives in the Danish art scene in the recent years. A significantly large number of BIPOCs have organized in collectives across the fields of media, activism and art, such as UFOlab, Marronage, FCNN, (Un)told Pages, A Seat at the Table, Andromeda and The Union—Cultural Workers’ Union for BIPOCs in Denmark.22 These collectives consist of both students and professionals, and have —through performances, readings, zines, self-made media platforms, artist-driven spaces, book stores, festivals or artists’ organizations—acted as rewriters, confronters, archivists, caretakers and healers of Danish cultural memory and its “ghosts.” They organize as being too many—always more than the needed number in order to represent the 14% of “migrants and descendants of migrants”—and through their separatist composition in groups, they draw attention not to what is “fair” but to what is “worthwhile” giving attention to in our historical present.

In the earlier part of this article I presented Ahmed’s idea of organizations as giving attention to what is “worthwhile” in a historical present. I interpret the collective practices listed here as infrastructural performance—a structure-challenging artistic form, in itself an artistic statement on what is worthwhile (Schmidt 2018). Infrastructural performance is part of a broader movement of what has been termed assemblies (Butler 2015; Harney, Moten, and Sawyer 2021): groups that do not mirror broader structures, but performatively renew and produce “ideals of equality and interdependency” for larger contexts, as Judith Butler put it (Butler 2015, 137). The collectives mentioned above are small-scale cultural organizations performing within the infrastructures of representation. Consisting of BIPOCs only, they neither offer a postmodern, exotizing “touch of ethnicity” (Hall 1993, 105) nor a group of “fair” representants. Instead, they are self-instituted and draw a full attention to BIPOCs in Denmark. The composition of bodies and their articulation of racialization as interdependent is the message, so to speak. In being too many, they insist on paying attention to BIPOC identity in the context of white art institutions, and through this employ a strategic essentialism to make a lack of BIPOC representation in the arts perceptible, as well as drawing attention to non-white traditions and non-white culture. However, there is a risk of fetishizing the infrastructural performance as an artwork—particularly since some of the groups understand themselves as activists rather than artists (Marronage 2019, 2020).

Next to the bust in the harbour, the infrastructural performances suggest social and living sculptures in the Danish public space. The infrastructural performances by BIPOC collectives can be understood as proposals beyond “fair” and adequate representation as “we” know it. It is a strategy that not only suggests a plurality or diversity, but as exercising critical diversity work. Tokenizing representation is—as El Kaisy Friemuth recalls in memory of Yahya Hassan—harmful: by reducing identity to something that fits into a folder in the institution, it is excluding, isolating and possibly even fatal. What can be extracted from infrastructural performances by the BIPOC collectives mentioned above is that they are constituted out of necessity—not freedom—and that they stem from interdependency.

Being too many in BIPOC collectives is an artistic answer to the experiences of the systemic racial loneliness produced through the ignorance of race in policies and documents in Higher Education in the Arts in Denmark. Fred Moten has written on Black poetics, departing from Édouard Glissant’s poetics of relation: he employs an understanding of existence as consent not to be a single being (Glissant 1997; Moten 2017). Moten is here developing a thinking of existence without identity in times of so-called “identity politics.” The suggestion is always and already to be too many: “No count, they say, because we are uncountable, because we are the miracle that cannot be accounted for in any science of ownership’s brutal double entry.” (2017, 275). Moten’s break with a measuring and demarcating reason, which—according to him, but also to David Lloyd (2018) and Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007)—goes back to enslavement, resonates in the infrastructural performances of BIPOC collectives: to be allowed to be too many, not just in terms of authorship, but also fundamentally allowing interdependency and plural identities; neither to be tokenized as representing one racialized identity nor to be personified when intervening in the racializing and colonizing repercussions in the infrastructures of the arts in Denmark.

Endnotes

1. Quote from the statement in the video documenting the sinking of the statue (Anonymous Visual Artists 2020, minute 01:32).

2. A short introduction to Danish colonialism: The three Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John were Danish colonies for over 250 years and Denmark was—with engagements in the transatlantic enslavement triangle—the seventh largest slave-trading nation worldwide. Greenland was a Danish colony from 1721 (first: Danish-
Norwegian) until 1953. The major narrative is still that Denmark is part of a “Nordic exceptionalism” (Danbolt 2016), meaning that Denmark, before others, set the enslaved free and is still, although it is costly, benevolently helping the former colony Greenland’s small nation to survive through some continuous, semi-colonial ties. Despite the brutal history of the Danish slave trade from 1673–1863, and despite the recent documentation of the forced adoption of Greenlandic children in the twentieth century, there have been no paid reparations from Danish governments.

3. I employ the term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) as a term used for racialized persons—here students, artists, cultural workers. The term is employed by The Union, a union of racialized artists and cultural workers in Denmark, and I choose to employ this term in order to focus on race—not “migration status” or “ethnicity”—as a category otherwise silenced in Denmark, and racism as something that has to be articulated and examined further in a Danish context.

4. I want to draw attention here to the explicit curation against BIPOC loneliness at the Malmö Theatre Academy, who in their admissions for the acting class have 5 BIPOCs in a class of 12 students. The institution explicitly has “inclusion” as a recruitment strategy and collaborates with the Folkshighschool Fridhem—a school working with young people with migrant backgrounds—on qualifying students for admission, see “Breddad rekrytering” (in Swedish) at https://www.thm.lu.se/om-traterhogscolan/organisation/mangfald-jamstallhet-likebehandling.

5. “Western” migrants are from the EU, Switzerland, Andorra, San Marino, the Vatican City State, Australia, New Zealand, USA and Canada. All other migrants are defined as “non-Western” (Danmarks Statistik 2018). This terminology has been questioned widely, but continues to be employed in Danish legislation and public discourse.

6. Denmark has three art academies, in Aarhus, Odense and Copenhagen, but only the latter is accredited under the Cultural Ministry and has implemented the Bologna Process. The faculty at the art academy in Copenhagen is definitely both international and partly “non-Western,” and one professor out of eight could be characterized as BIPOC and they were employed in 2020. The staff at the art academy in Odense is Danish and racialized white. Also the five faculty members at the art academy in Aarhus are Swedish, German and Danish and racialized white. The rector at the three institutions are Danish and racialized white. The numbers here are based on information taken from the websites of the academies, January 2022.

7. The student of colour as representative not for herself but for a whole “race” is described by an anonymous student of sociology in conversation with the dramaturge and curator Julian Warner, see “Gibt’s hier Schwarze Profis? Gespräch mit einer Schwarzen Soziologiestudentin.” In Liesch, Elisa, Julian Warner and Mathias Pees, eds. 2018. Allianzen. Kritische Praxis und weisen, 264–275. Bielefeld: transcript verlag.

8. It should be mentioned that on 24 January 2022 the Danish social democrat government, with supporting parties, decided to formulate a national action plan against racism and discrimination. See: https://www.justitsministeriet.dk/pressemeddelelse/regeringen-er-enig-med-sf-radikale-venstrefrig-bekampelse-af-rasisme-om-at-lave-en-handlingsplan-mod-racisme/

To my knowledge, this is the first time the government recognizes and uses the term “racism.” In January 2021, the prime minister Mette Frederiksen said exactly the opposite: that she did not find it necessary to take special action against racism (Danbolt and Ullerup Schmidt 2021, 61).

9. See “Mobility strategy 2020 for the European Higher Education Area” (2012), https://www.cmeplus.si/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2012-EHEA-Mobility-Strategy.pdf.

10. For the most recent “eligible members,” see: https://erasmus-plus.cc.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-a-eligible-countries.

11. See the objectives of the Erasmus+ Programme across Higher Education: https://erasmus-plus.cc.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-a-priorities-of-the-erasmus-programme/objectives-features (accessed 7.2.22).

12. The most recent argument for the personal achievements to be gained through Erasmus+ are linked to the betterment of European competitiveness: to be “contributing to sustainable growth, quality jobs and social cohesion, to driving innovation, and to strengthening European identity and active citizenship.” https://erasmus-plus.cc.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-a-priorities-of-the-erasmus-programme-objectives-features (accessed 7.2.22).

13. Neoliberalism has not had the same impact on Higher Education in Denmark as in the UK or US where the universities are increasingly privatized. However, the rationalities of meritocracy, individuation and competition are vivid.

14. Although non-European countries also enhance the mobility of students in global capitalism, national borders are repeatedly confirmed as privileging members of the Erasmus network. In January 2021, the Danish police sent a Chinese exchange student at the University of Copenhagen to the much criticized detention camp for refugees, Ellebek, since she had missed extending her visa due to COVID19-related depression. See also https://unuvisen.dk/en/copenhagen-student-ended-up-at-deportation-facility-sent-home-to-china/ However, this decision was not due to EU policy but was a decision made by the Danish authorities and can be seen as an example of an overall tendency in Denmark to disregard EU policy and tighten migration policies.

15. An example can be found in the Danish National School of Performing Arts’s (DASPA) mapping of their own “DASPA network,” which is depicted in Google Maps and also entails partnerships outside the European continent, in Greenland, Iceland, Ghana and Brazil. See https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?hl=d&d=a&hl=d&a&ll=5.401766727714633%2C-32.625233621787748&z=28&mid=1D8ZJH1EybFU3X0jKjQjdMFrR0H4C9 (accessed 7.2.22).

16. Tess Sophie Skadegård Thorsen unfolds in her PhD dissertation in detail how race in the Danish film industry is replaced by proxies such as “ethnicity,
nationality and immigration-status/history” and reads this into a greater picture of Danish policy avoiding measurement, representation and discussion of race (Thorsen 2020, 50).

17. Conversation with Dina El Kaisi Friemuth and students of Modern Cultural Studies in the Cultural History: Collectives and Artistic Communities seminar, 4 May 2020 (the author’s own recordings)

18. Ibid.

19. An analysis of how the interpellation by critics, grants and prizes reduce authors to racialized and minoritized stereotypes can be found in literary scholar Solveig Daugaard’s “Infrastructural poetics in Yahya Hassan and Shadi Angelina Bazeghi” (Daugaard 2023, forthcoming).

20. At the Jutland Art Academy, which is funded by only 1 million Danish crown from the Cultural Ministry, with additional support from the Municipality of Aarhus and private funds, and is not accredited in the Bologna Process, the numbers of admission are not registered in the Danish statistics as they only include data from accredited institutions. But from a conversation with the rector Judith Schwarzbart, I learn that the Jutland Art Academy receives solely applicants from the Nordic region. Also, she expressed a difficulty in recruiting applicants beyond the racialized white middle class. She confirmed that Elyiah Mesayer was the only BIPoC student in her class and that only rarely does a BIPoC student have the company of other BIPoCs in their classes in this relatively small institution, which admits approximately 45 students across its basic and diploma program.

21. I do not refer to “postmigration” as a general societal condition in the 21st century as does the recent German theatre scene around Ballhaus Naunynstrasse and the Maxim Gorki Theatre, also elaborated on extensively by colleagues in the research group Art, Culture and Politics in the “Postmigrant Condition”, conducted by Anne Ring Petersen and Moritz Schramm. See also: Schramm Moritz, Peter Moslund and Anne Ring Petersen, eds. 2019. Reframing Migration, Diversity and the Arts: The Postmigrant Condition. New York and London: Routledge.

22. I list the artists’ collectives here without naming each of the individual members. I do this mainly because I understand their practices as attempts to draw attention away from the individual to the collective signature. Marronage, a collective of decolonial feminists operating since 2016, does not list their names on their website and has confirmed in an email to me that this is a strategic proposal.

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