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Hopeful Things as Minor Interventions in Educational Atmospheres: A Diffractive Translation of Sara Ahmed's 'Happy Objects' to Nordic Diversity Work

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Abstract

Drawing on scholarship on affects, moods, and affective pedagogies in education, we explore how educators in a Danish gymnasium weaved hopes and anxieties into a school space and the specific things, such as books and bookshelves, to address and improve the inclusion of racialized students in school life. Based on a feminist new materialist and *diffractive reading through translation* of English-language based concepts through Danish grammar and language, we explore how the concept of the "happy object" as delineated by feminist scholar Sara Ahmed takes on a more hopeful interpretation when analyzed within the Danish educational context and language. We argue that 'foreign' concepts require careful consideration and adaptation to suit another (Danish) linguistic, cultural, and racial context. Making such adjustments is not just a matter of taking specificities of local contexts seriously, it is also a means of advancing theory that can inspire analyses conducted in a wider range of educational time-space-coordinates.

Keywords

Diversity work; Racialization; Affective pedagogies; Happy objects; Hopeful things; Local specificities

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Local specificities matter

Scholarship within the Danish and Nordic European educational contexts has illuminated the intricate processes of racialization that permeate across various educational institutions and levels (Harlap and Riese, 2022; Svendsen, 2014; Vertelyte and Li, 2021). The expanding body of research in education concerning race and racialization continues to make profound contributions by unveiling how racialization unfolds within the ostensibly exceptionalist framework of Nordic equality (Clarke and Vertelyte, 2023; Loftsdóttir and Jensen, 2012). Scholars within this framework have challenged the notions of colorblindness and racial ignorance, rejecting the belief that race is inconsequential in the Nordic countries (Khawaja, 2022). Furthermore, research has highlighted how race and racialization not only shape institutional structures and experiences but also permeate the moods and atmospheres of educational spaces and pedagogies (Vertelyte and Staunæs, 2021).

Nonetheless many core concepts in the field of critical race studies and racialization used in the Nordic countries originate from Anglophone countries such as the US, UK, and Canada. While conceptual frameworks critically dealing with race and racialization developed in English-speaking contexts have paved the way for addressing the relevance of race in Nordic context, there is a risk that the contextual specificities can be 'lost in translation' when using 'monolingual frames' (Butler, 2024; Hohti and Truman 2021) for understanding race and racialization in these countries. In other words, we need to carefully consider how concepts originating from 'foreign' contexts may shape our analysis that are based within different socio-linguistic settings. Judith Butler (2024) in the discussion on politics of translation of the concept "gender" states that translation "is a way of developing a multilingual epistemology" (p.230) and to demonstrate "the way that syntax of one language is disturbed and transformed by the syntax of another" (p.230). Even in our planetary interconnected, postcolonial, advanced capitalist world (Braidotti et al., 2018), specificities hold significance. Therefore, concepts that we use and borrow from different socio-political contexts require careful methodological consideration and rearticulation when working with different linguistic, cultural, and racial grammars (Bonilla-Silva, 2012; Hvenegård-Lassen and Staunæs, 2020), including a language like Danish spoken only by around seven million people. Making these conceptual adjustments is not just a matter of accounting to the local context; it is also a means of advancing theory that can inspire analyses conducted in a wide range of contexts, times, and places.

Specifically, in this article, we aim to explore how the concept of the "happy object" as delineated by feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2010) takes on a more hopeful interpretation when diffractively read within the Danish educational context, language, and grammar. The concept "happy object", first discussed by Ahmed in the context of the UK has been used to show how certain atmospheres, affects and moods evolve around and are attached to specific objects or phenomenon. In the case used in this article, we are reformulating and developing the concept of "happy objects", when analyzing how educators and school leaders work in addressing the tense atmospheres associated with specific schools' spaces and entangled with experiences of racialized inequality, othering, and exclusion in one high school (in Danish: gymnasium) in Copenhagen, Denmark. This work that is done by the educators and leaders involves different forms of what we,

following Erin Manning's delineation of 'minor gestures' (2016), analytically term minor interventions into diversity work as atmospheric work (Ahmed, 2014). This is work that educators do on a day-to-day level despite the lack of formal guidance and pedagogy on how to work with diversity, racialization, and inclusion.

In this article, we explore one of the minor interventions we observed at a Danish high school. During interviews with teachers and school leaders, we encountered how educators described their efforts to work with diversity and inclusion by changing the atmosphere that had taken hold in the school corridor. The teachers' minor intervention was to set up bookshelves and books in the corridor in such a way as to create an inviting and positive school atmosphere, and with the aim of encouraging all students, but especially racialized minority students, to engage in learning.

The aim of this article is two-fold. First, when engaging with the analysis of the school corridor intervention we want to show and examine how minor interventions into shaping school space atmospheres take place in Danish educational context. Second, we want to highlight the methodological process of *diffractive reading through translation* when adapting 'foreign' concepts in the local contexts, such as the Danish. We do so, when reformulating Sara Ahmed's concept from "happy objects" to "hopeful things" and using it to examine how hopes and anxieties are woven into minor interventions in educational contexts and how affective atmospheres associated with racialized school spaces are shaped and altered with material things. First, we discuss the context of race and racialization in Denmark, followed by the discussion of our approach to minor interventions as diversity work as atmospheric work. We then present the empirical example of a minor intervention in a school corridor and discuss our methodology of diffractive reading through translation when engaging with the analysis. This is followed by our analysis of the corridor minor intervention and discussion of our rearticulation of happy objects as "hopeful things".

Racially charged cafeterias, school walls, and cozy sofa corners: Race and racialization in Danish schools

School spaces are marked and affectively charged by feelings of racialized exclusion and despair. In 1997, Beverly Tatum posed a question that continues to strike many people when they first walk through the doors of high schools in the USA: "Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" (Tatum, 1997). In Denmark, even though the history of racism differs from that of the US, similar questions regarding differently racialized spaces have sparked curiosity among educators, the public and have been addressed in the research. For example, in the Danish context of comprehensive schooling, an article from 2003, speculated as to why all the Turkish–Kurdish boys hung out on benches placed along the school's walls (Staunæs, 2003). In 2015, yet another article, pondered about a phenomenon the teachers' termed "the Muslim sofa corner" where students' despair and the inability to thrive gain space (Khawaja, 2015). In 2022, a researcher observed that school leaders, teachers, and students continued to grapple with Tatum's question (Vertelyté, 2022) when debating racialized students' friendships in a Danish school. An observation that seems to continue in 2023 by the couch near the cafeteria at a Danish high

school (Berisha, 2023). What such research highlights is that schools have for decades struggled with racialized inequalities, othering, and exclusion that materializes in a highly charged atmosphere in specific localities and spaces as the “cafeteria,” “the school walls,” and “the sofa corner” (see also Blaisdell, 2016; Hassani, 2022; Stevenson, 2014).

In Danish schools, racially minoritized students are formally and informally referred to as “bilingual students,” “ethnic minority students,” “non-Western students,” or "students with a foreign background." However, researchers have shown how such labels for minoritized students function as proxies for race, indicating racialized differences rather than students' linguistic diversity or national backgrounds (Li and Enemark, 2023; Vertelyte, 2022). For example, such categories are not applied to students with backgrounds in regions considered part of “the West,” but have historically been applied to racialized students since the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period with significant immigration of so-called guest workers from Turkey, Pakistan, and the former Yugoslavia, and later the arrival of refugees from the 1980s onwards (Buchardt, 2019). In everyday language, these categories are used interchangeably with the category of “Muslim students” without reflection on the performative effects in a kind of “fungibility” economy, where religion and race can be exchanged (Snorton, 2017).

Danish schools do not have distinct labels for racialized minority students from the former Danish colonies, nor for students with families originating in the other parts of the Danish Commonwealth, Greenland, and the Faeroe Islands. However, these students may also attend Danish high schools and are part of the group we refer to as “racially minoritized students”—a term we use to highlight the experiences of students who have been subjected to racialization based on factors like their skin color, language, faith, or migration history, as well as broader societal and affective discourses and material conditions. In this regard, it is important to note that racially minoritized students are not a homogeneous group but encompass a diverse range of identities and experiences. By racialization, we mean the processes of differentiation in which phenotypical, cultural, and linguistic differences come to matter (Khawaja et al., 2023) and are used in social processes of othering and exclusion in everyday life (Goldberg and Solomos, 2002). Racialization thus takes place through historical and cultural structures of feelings (Williams, 1977) that are already present in the encounter and is experienced differently depending on whether one lives in a state of exclusion (as, e.g., a refugee, an immigrant, or a non-Danish citizen). In the same way, individuals’ experiences of racialization depend on how they are read and positioned in the classroom. Do others see you as belonging to a minority or the majority group? Does your body (along with such accessories as clothes, jewelry, headgear, footwear) carry signs that in a Danish school context are associated with and interpreted as stories of migration, either forced or voluntary (from, e.g., the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, or South-East Asia); of transnational adoption (from, e.g., South-East Asia, South America, or East Africa); or of colonial relations (e.g., People from Greenland)? It is such bodily signs and the associated interpretive repertoires that point to historical and social distributions of power and privilege. In everyday encounters, these signs and repertoires shape the experience of race and racialization—whether it means something and how it makes a difference.

Minor interventions in diversity work as atmospheric work

Research underscores that affects, intensities, feelings, and moods have gained prominence in the realm of education and critical (including antiracist, decolonial, and culturally responsive) pedagogies (Dernikos et al., 2020; Eriksen, 2020; Leonardo and Zembylas, 2013). This focus can be traced back to the question that the sociologist William Du Bois ([1903] 1985) famously posed, "How does it feel to be a problem?" and Frantz Fanon's writings on feelings, race, and colonial structures (1967 [2008]). Focusing on affects, moods, and feelings helps us to better understand the experiences and affective investments related to racialization that both students and educators navigate daily, whether this involves alleviating, transforming, or enduring distressing moods.

In this article, we delve deeper into "diversity work as atmospheric work," drawing inspiration from the work of Sara Ahmed (2014). For example, diversity work as atmospheric work occurs when students and educators deliberate whether or not a racial joke told in the classroom is funny (Vertelyte, 2023), when a teacher feels they have been misunderstood and stigmatized as racist and tries to explain themselves and restore damaged relations, or when racially minoritized students encounter skepticism from teachers or peers when describing their experiences of racism or exclusion. When viewed through the lens of affect, race and racialization become expressions of encounters that are inherently entwined with historically and culturally mediated hierarchies and power structures (Andreassen and Vitus, 2016). These hierarchies and configurations of power are effective precisely because they are deeply intertwined with and supported by affective investments.

We use the term "diversity work as atmospheric work" to refer to everyday practices within institutions that seek to address multifaceted issues related to diversity. These issues may encompass a wide range of dimensions, including race, racialization, gender inclusivity, neurodiversity, and age diversity. Diversity work involves deliberate efforts and strategies developed by institutions to tackle these complex and intersecting aspects of diversity. Approaching diversity work as atmospheric work can expand questions of identity (who/what am I/are you/we?) and the relations between identities to further include questions about intensity. This means we can explore how (affective) intensity, or the flow of a mood can be built up, accelerated, or reduced and toned down (Massumi, 2002). In simple terms, we can examine these surges and drops in energy with reference to the lines between pleasure and discomfort, joy and pain/unhappiness, which allows us to work with diversity work that seek to increase or reduce the intensity of a pleasant or an uncomfortable mood and to transform an inappropriate mood into one that is more appropriate or livable (Juelskjær & Staunæs, 2016). .

Diversity work as atmospheric work differs from (but cannot replace) the type of diversity work that monitors numbers, percentages, and representation of diversity within the curriculum and among the teaching staff. Diversity work that we discuss here involves sensing, noticing, and paying close attention to one's own and others' gut feelings about the presence of racialized moods. These moods, while transient, also linger and significantly impact how individuals experiencing this atmosphere perceive and interact with the world. Diversity work that we

describe in this article often lacks formal guidelines or pedagogical frameworks and instead is carried through what we call minor interventions.

Slightly twisting Erin Manning's concept of the "minor gesture" (2016), we claim that a minor intervention is not a revolutionary or spectacular action, nor is it a pre-packaged concept. Drawing from Deleuze writing on the "minor", Manning defines minor gestures as a force that "works the major from within" (2016, p.1) and understood as "rhythms that are not governed by preexisting structures but are open to change and flow and to "it's potential variation" (2016, p.1). Focusing on minor interventions, thus involves being attuned to small adjustments, innovations, and experiments that school leaders and educators reflectively undertake daily to intervene in and improve educational conditions for racialized minority students and/or address experiences of inequality, othering, and exclusion. An intervention is an action that intervenes in and attempts to adjust or alter a situation. Minor interventions thus encompass hopes for a different—and, perhaps or hopefully, better—situation. However, as we will show in this article, minor interventions can also encompass what Ernst Bloch (1959) calls anticipatory affects, such as anxiety about what might happen if specific actions are not taken. Furthermore, this anxiety, just like hope, can have structural consequences that go beyond and displace what the intervention originally promised. In the following, we introduce and analyze the corridor minor intervention.

School corridor intervention: Methodological inquiry into a minor-intervention and diffractive reading through translation

In the fall of 2020, as part of a qualitative research project on diversity work in education, we gained access to two high schools[1] in Greater Copenhagen. In these schools, racially minoritized students made up more than half of the student body. The aim of the project was to investigate students' affectively shaped racial experiences and explore how educators attended to and approached collective feelings among students associated with these experiences. For this article, we draw on ethnographic material from one of these high schools and 10 qualitative interviews with the school's staff (principal, vice principal, and teachers). The data was collected throughout the period of June 2020 and August 2021.

Across our study, we encountered a number of educators who made minor interventions in order to create a positive and diverse atmosphere. Some of these interventions involved concrete objects, such as decorating the school's communal areas with garlands of rainbow flags during Copenhagen Pride Week or putting up giant posters showcasing the diversity of the school's graduates. During the interviews we conducted at one of the high schools, educators repeatedly referred to a particular corridor at their school—a school that was otherwise celebrated for its modern architecture. Among both teachers and students, this corridor had come to be known as "death row" [in Danish: *dødsgangen*] and was linked to notions of "unruliness," "loudness," "chaos," and the large number of racially minoritized male students who spent their breaks in this

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[1] Danish high schools are for students aged between 16 and 19.

corridor.

In the interviews, we followed the narratives about this particular space and educators' strategies to redesign the corridor by the means of installing new book shelfs and thereby control and positively transform the atmosphere at the school. The school leaders and educators that we spoke with did not call their strategies "minor interventions" or "diversity work". However, the interviews we conducted made it evident that their work did, in fact, experiment with minor interventions that addressed issues of diversity.

When engaging with the analysis of our empirical material gathered on the minor intervention in the school corridor, we started by delving into Sara Ahmed's concepts of 'happy objects.' The bookshelves and other objects and items used in this minor intervention served as happy objects by aligning themselves with the notion of a joyful unified school community. Yet, while our article is written in English, the empirical material upon which it is based originates from Denmark and has emerged within Danish language and grammar. Therefore, when working with empirical data in Danish, we engaged in a process of thinking and translating English language concepts into Danish. In doing so, not only was the empirical material itself considered, but also the analysis become intertwined with, embraced, and embodied the specificities of the Danish context and language. When translating 'happy object' into Danish, we noticed that its meaning shifted, opening doors to different interpretations. Here, 'happiness' acquired more 'hopeful' connotations, while 'objects' alluded more to material, tangible entities rather than phenomena. The latter rearticulation was specifically informed by the feminist new materialist reading (Barad, 2017; Snaza et al., 2016), which allowed us to emphasize the agential and vibrant matter (Bennett, 2010) of objects and things and how they are entangled in reshaping and animating (Chen, 2012) the atmosphere in the corridor and students' bodily movements. Our aim was not to change the concept, but rather, in feminist new materialist terms (Barad, 2014; Juelskjær, 2013), let the translation work of the Danish language and grammar diffract our adaptation and rearticulation of the concept. In other words, when working with the concept such as happy object when diffractively reading it through translation, our emphasis is to show how concepts are produced as "something specific" (Juelskjær 2013, p.755) – as an entanglement and co-constitution of specific cultural-social-linguistic settings. As Juelskjær et al. (2020) stated: "A diffractive practice reads insights through one another instead of against one another" (p.11). A diffractive reading of our empirical material situated within the Danish educational context, combined with the act of translating the concept of 'happy objects,' enables us to underscore the nuances that these concepts acquire within specific linguistic, cultural, and institutional contexts. By doing so, we can further develop concepts and theories that have the potential to inspire analyses conducted across a diverse array of contexts, temporalities, and geographical locations. In the following we present our analysis of the school corridor minor interventions and further delineate our re-articulation of the concept "happy objects" as "hopeful things".

From safe heaven to "death row"

Corridors are often perceived as connecting one place to another rather than as spaces in their own right. At the high school where we conducted our observations, the wide corridor area was probably simply intended to funnel students away from the entrance hall and into the classrooms. However, its location far from the school cafeteria, the administrative offices, and the staffroom, combined with the large exit doors with their promise of life in the city outside, made it easy for this space to become a rather intense "corridor life" that had more in common with street life rather than student life. To give a definition, "corridor life" refers to the life that unfurls among students outside the classrooms. In the research literature, corridor life is often considered central to students' motivation and their receptiveness to classroom education (see, for example, Eckert, 1993; Rasmussen, 2021; Thorne, 1993). As one of the teachers that we interviewed explained:

> *[The corridor] went from being called "death row"—that was the students' name for [it], and we thought it was a really sad name [...] I think it was just that those who saw themselves as "slackers" could sit there. [...] It didn't mean they were doomed to die, or that it was dangerous to be there. It wasn't anything like that, though maybe it's a bit of an identity, being someone who skips class.*

An empty in-between space can fill up with noise, vandalism, disorder. The atmosphere that creates affects—that is to say, touches and moves—the students and their emotional states. As Farhad, one of the students we interviewed, said, people could feel a bit anxious and uneasy moving along the corridor. Gradually, the corridor came to be associated with anti-school attitudes rather than an accessible space, but at the same time providing a safe haven for racially minoritized students.

In the excerpts below, two of the school's teachers observed how descriptions of the corridor by two of the school's teachers switched back and forth between categories of "bilingual students" and "students with a minority background," and examples of "truancy," "slacking" (i.e., slacking off), and "vandalism."

> *Teacher 1: A lot of the bilingual students met up there because they liked to stay and hang out after school [...] and then there was also kind of an idea that if you skip class, you could hang out there. And it was like an open [hallway], so [...] they were a lot more visible, they could kind of play at being top of the heap, King Carrot [someone is acting like they are king of the castle/king of the hill, or acting all high and mighty] and all that, you know?*
>
> *Teacher 2: It was really noisy, and very few students who wanted to do their homework sat there. [And] it was pretty much only Black and Brown students who gathered there.*
>
> *Teacher 1: We had some pretty stupid incidents with some sealant. We had just had new sealant applied, we had some stained glass and then this new rubber sealant had been applied, and some of them [the students] discovered it was*

> *wet, so you could just go and kind of gouge it out and draw on the windows with the sealant. Any kind of student could have come up with that. But we [the staff, teachers] were like: Well, look after our place, for God's sake. Look, it costs money [...] and can't you clean up after yourselves?*

As the teacher states above, the incident involving the sealant could have been caused by "any kind of student." However, the specter of a racialized minority student offender seems to lurk within the narrative due to the connection between the corridor and the racially minoritized students, immediately suggesting that the vandalism was carried out by youths from this racialized minority group, despite the common understanding that anyone could have been responsible. The association of this ghostly specter of a racialized male student as responsible was made more tangible by the temporary use of the school premises by young men who were not enrolled as students at the school. Young men who *maybe* (according to the educators) had connections to the "immigrant gang environment" in Greater Copenhagen. The corridor thus became known as a stage for young men from outside who were engaged in behavior characterized by the teachers as arrogant and threatening, showing off in front of both students and teachers.

Truancy, vandalism, and machismo thus coalesced and circulated in the corridor. This, in turn, intensified the experiences of discomfort and stigmatization among students who were already grappling with feelings of racial marginalization. What was once a sanctuary within the school for racially minoritized students became something akin to a nightmare for everyone. The students' description of the corridor as "death row," as well as the narrative surrounding it, underscores how the corridor and those who frequented it became entangled in a web of affective associations, including terms like "dark," "black," "hopelessness," "unclean," or "filthy." This situation was not merely unfortunate or regrettable; as emphasized by the school leaders and educators in their interviews, it was a tragedy. It did not benefit the lives or educational experiences of the current students, and it also had potentially adverse effects on the school's reputation and its capacity to attract new students. In the following sections, we take a closer look at how educators undertook minor interventions to address this issue.

From death row to study environment

An issue that posed a significant challenge for the school was the atmosphere created by the interconnected notions of "problematic behavior," "underachievement," and racialized minority students. The school sought to address this complex affective issue through a minor intervention in the school corridor and in the lives that the students conducted there. Selecting the corridor as the specific location for staging this intervention was therefore a strategic choice. In the words of the vice principal:

> *And then I thought, can't we try creating a different student composition [changing which students hang out in the corridor], and what would we need to do? We ended up putting up bookshelves. The idea was that then a few small groups would be able to gather. That would give greater security, and then they could meet there.*

Instead of shutting down the corridor, putting up posters with rules, or excluding certain individuals, this minor intervention involved an everyday form of "nudging"—gently encouraging users to change their own behavior. The strategic placement of bookshelves and books was intended to create a motivating and stimulating atmosphere, transforming "death row" into a safe study environment. In other words, by focusing on this intermediary space, the school's management attempted to potentialize a space normally associated with recess, breaks, or transitions (Bjerg and Staunæs, 2018, p. 197). This approach was also intended to prevent a few individuals from taking ownership of and setting the tone for the entire corridor as in-between space. As one teacher elaborated:

> *Now we've made it a bit cozier and more intimate, so you don't so much "own" the whole corridor, and we've broken it up as well, made it more accommodating so you can sit and get your homework done and stuff like that. [...] It's a lot of the same [students][...] but not so many of them. You can't act up or be a smartass in the same way and take up the whole corridor [...] But now it's the study corridor.*

The hope concealed in this intervention was tucked away inside the books and bookshelves; more specifically, in books from the school's book repository installed in the corridor. These books carried the history of the school within them, perhaps also its spirit or, if you like, the educational ethos to which that history belongs. The books primarily told stories from Denmark and Europe, animating the space with an atmosphere that collectively nudged the students towards a particular educational universe shaped by Man's project and the subjectivities of Enlightenment (Spillers, 1987). The spines and titles of the books populated the high school stage with figures from Danish and Western literature. In doing so, the books established and emphasized mood by highlighting what is important, peripheral, or entirely absent in the Eurocentric optic. Most of these books had little resonance with the current lives, backgrounds, and future directions of the minoritized students at this high school in Copenhagen and their extended families. Alternatives to Eurocentric kinds of content, authors, nations and historical specificities, as highlighted by for instance a term like Afropolitanism (Mhembe & Balakrishan 2016) on the bookshelves could have created engagement, possibilities of identification, radical openness and hope aligned suitable for many minoritized students. Or perhaps alternative affects like frustration and despair, which by the educators may not be classified as a 'hopeful thing', but nevertheless has the capacity for 'bildung' and self-reflection as emphasized in policy papers on the 'gymnasium'.

Other school activities contained traces of young urban life, such as #Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, but the historical and cultural connections in the book intervention (and in the school's communal activities in general) were more closely aligned with figures like the Nordic queen Margrethe I (1353–1412) than with the Southwest African Queen Nzinga (c. 1583–1663), who ruled the Ambundu Kingdoms of Ndongo and Matamba, now known as Angola; more with the young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg than with the Nobel-Prize-winning young activist and blogger Malala Yousafzai. In this sense, the corridor intervention was both sensitive and attentive to the students' present-day issues, pain, and insecurity. However, it was less culturally responsive and less relevant in its approach to intervening in and addressing other geographies, backgrounds,

and historical traces, as well as experiences of racialization, exclusion, and othering (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

To change the mood from “death row” to “study environment,” the educators redesigned the space’s interior and furnishings, engaging with the affective-material and intellectual power that lies hidden in books and bookshelves. As one teacher put it, “Colleagues donated books from the old book repositories, so it sort of smells of books.” The word “smell” led us to trace how the school worked to create a particular atmosphere and how these efforts affected the students through very particular small things. Things may shimmer and animate a specific atmosphere through their “vibe,” which emanates a particular performative power (Bennett, 2010; Chen, 2012). This is both because the *things* (in this case, the books) have acquired a specific cultural meaning, but also because the materiality of books (the paper, the brick-like shape, the letters, the weight, and the smell) gives them a special agency and effect. This materiality enabled the books to breathe life into a calmer study environment. Their cardboard spines and paper pages absorbed the sounds of footsteps, chatter, and commotion. They improved the acoustics; they swallowed up noise; they softened loud, sharp noises; and they transformed the corridor into a livable and vibrant soundscape with a gentle, pleasant vibe that resonated in the students’ bodies, encouraging them to get to work, to relax, and reducing the level of conflict.

The intellectual power of the books lay in their connection to concepts of education, high school, language, knowledge, and enlightenment ideals. Together, these elements counteracted the corridor’s prevailing association with truancy and "skiving." The books in this minor intervention were old and well-used. They were enlisted from the school’s book repositories with the hope that they would bring with them the long history and distinctive ethos of the high school, reinvigorating the atmosphere of the corridor and inspiring and motivating the students to learn. Both the books and the act of directing an intervention were intended to energize the students, regardless of their racially minoritized backgrounds, by fostering a culture of knowledge, enlightenment, academic study, and appropriate school conduct. This stood in contrast to engaging in acts of vandalism, intimidation, peer pressure, and the senseless smearing of tile sealant on the school’s windows.

The bookshelves on which the books were stored were able to exert a directly educational effect on the students’ patterns of movement by virtue of partitioning the corridor and thus drawing their attention away from other things or people close by that might encourage unruly behavior. The bookshelves promoted and shaped bodily movements that were calm and aligned with traditional ideas of how literate and educated bodies look and conduct themselves. The tables and chairs placed in the corridor encouraged students to sit and talk to one another rather than loitering. The shelves were high or low enough for the educators and the students to see over or under them, and there were enough books on the shelves to deflect and dampen the sound of voices while still allowing communication. As one teacher said: “You can sit down at the other end without really being [there] and you can see what they’re up to down there. It’s not as if you’re filling the whole hallway [with furniture and books].”

This intervention highlights that feelings and moods are not abstract, immaterial, or free-floating; they manifest in and around tangible things and bodies. With that in mind, the high school mobilized the school's things (bookshelves, books) and bodies (students) to address and transform an uneasy, and at times destructive atmosphere among the students. Accordingly, furniture was used to set the scene, helping to redesign the learning environment and, more specifically, to create and demarcate the corridor space and orchestrate the students' bodily movements and physical presence in new ways (see also Juelskjær, 2013). The alternative would have involved individual teachers or the principal reprimanding students, setting rules, and prohibiting loitering in the corridors. Instead, the intervention was employed to change the atmosphere by encouraging students to make active use of things and what they embody—such as learning—rather than skipping class and disorderly behavior. In other words, the books and bookshelves became "hopeful things" with the promise of an improved study environment and a better future for the students. We will now turn our attention to a discussion of the analytical possibilities presented by the concept of "hopeful things."

Hopeful things

Our choice of the term "hopeful things" was inspired by the work of the feminist scholar Sara Ahmed. Ahmed herself does not write about "hopeful things" as she does not employ feminist new materialist analytical use. Writing in English, she instead uses the term "happy objects," primarily in relation to a British context and racial minorities (Ahmed, 2010). For instance, Ahmed has demonstrated how "happiness" is affectively attached to discursive and material objects (like "the family" or "the multicultural nation") and, as a result, expands the possibilities for action of certain bodies while limiting those of others. In other words, the affective energies and flows stick, attaching themselves or holding onto certain objects or bodies and shaping experiences and interactions (Ahmed 2010). The concept of "happy objects" has been applied across a wide range of educational research (Naraian and Khoja-Moolji, 2016; Miller and Gkonou, 2023; Spector and Murray, 2023; Zembylas 2020). For example, Michalinos Zembylas (2020) has used the concept of "happy objects" to discuss how happiness permeates educational discourse as a desirable goal, while unhappiness and suffering can also be aspects of social justice education, particularly in relation to addressing racial inequalities.

In Ahmed's understanding, objects are not just material or physical; objects can also refer to values, practices, and aspirations (Ahmed, 2010). While Ahmed also uses the word "thing," sometimes interchangeably with "objects" and sometimes independently, she does not discuss the differences between the two terms. When analyzing the high school corridor intervention and the role played by the bookshelves, through a diffractive move of translation into Danish, we realized that the term "things" highlighted a few additional aspects of the intervention that were not fully encapsulated by the term "objects." *Ting* is an Old Norse word (also found in the English language as "thing") meaning something unspecified that happens in the world. In its primary meaning, a *ting* is what happens—a state, an event, an experience that has meaning for people. In its secondary meaning, a *ting* is something that gathers people in one place, an assembly or *ting* where laws are made and government is exercised (for example, the Icelandic parliament *Alting*

and the Danish parliament *Folketing).* A third meaning of *thing* is matter, a relationship; and a fourth meaning of *thing* is an object.

Because we are using the term as a tool for analyzing minor interventions, we are happy to include all these meanings in our translation of the term "happy objects," which is why we use the term "things" rather than "objects." By referring to "things" rather than objects, we move beyond Sara Ahmed's original formulation, which was limited to the phenomenological point that objects (things) can have an affective life because they have previously been given or endowed with a particular meaning or affectivity (Ahmed, 2010, p. 27). In doing so, we also move our analysis beyond Ahmed's concept to embrace a new materialist perspective, analyzing the inanimate (e.g. bookshelves and books) as something material with a vibe of its own, and also as something that always already encompasses raciality by imparting greater animacy—that is, life—and meaning to some things than to others (Chen, 2012).

The things that make up minor interventions are used both pedagogically and managerially in educational organizations. They are not there just for the sake of décor or aesthetics. Someone wants to achieve something with these things, and they have usually thought about them, set goals for them, and made decisions about them. Decisions regarding these elements are made with the intention of producing and managing desired outcomes, whether related to student engagement, well-being, the learning environment, or other educational aims. The promises inherent in these things are not just random points, but oriented toward and originating in a strategic direction set by the school's leadership and teachers in the hope that, with the assistance of the "things," a particular promising future can be evoked and made real. For instance, they hope to reduce noisy disruptions and enhance the academic engagement of racialized minority students by providing them with access to books.

When Ahmed writes about "happy objects," she uses the term to denote things that imply promises that are emotionally charged. These are things that bring happiness, promote happiness, or promise happiness ahead, or at least happier conditions than at present. With the promise of future happiness, the objects (things) also imply hope: the hope of something different, better. In one sense, the promises are bonded more tightly to the affective state, happiness, than to the thing or the object itself, but it is the "happy object" that promises someone something and commits itself to being part of fulfilling this promise.

In its original meaning, the Nordic word *lykke* [happiness] concerns how something "closes" [*lukker sig*], whereas what Ahmed is pointing to is how the English word "happy" intertwines with the word "happens": that is to say, something happens through the thing and we can trace a temporal movement into the future, albeit without a determinate or happy ending. Therefore, instead of "happy," we opted for the term "hopeful." This term underscores the temporal progression towards the future without knowledge of how it will unfold—guided only by hope. In fact, the word "hopeful" points to a forward-looking but unspecified hope for a different condition, rather than a specific positively connoted condition, as with the word "happy." Atmospheric intervention as "hopeful things" is about believing that if we do something, then

something different and better will happen—but probably something less preordained than indicated by a word like "happiness." It is diversity work's intrinsic hope of arriving at something different and better that the concept of "hopeful things" captures.

The term "hopeful things" highlights how diversity work in an educational context often involves getting one's hopes up and anticipating what might happen. Anticipation is not just a matter of thought and reason, but also of receptivity and affects. When diversity work takes the form of hopeful things, it emphasizes an affective orientation to the future (Ahmed, 2010, p. 181), an intervention that, at a profound level, also creates and reshapes that very future (Barad, 2017). Thinking with "hopeful things" better enables us to understand the atmospheric intervention in a high school corridor as managerial and pedagogical diversity work that encompasses both hope and promises and, furthermore, is already in the process of generating a future comprising a different form of diversity. Similarly, the concept "hopeful things" helps us to understand and analyze specific physical objects (in the sense of things that commit to and promise to modify the present and the past) to arrive at another affective state (that which has a potential to exist). On their own, though, things cannot create change. Even if things have a "groovy vibe" (Bennett, 2010), a rousing tone, a color, a shape, they must be of a kind that strikes and is picked up by the students' sensory registers. There must be some kind of reciprocity. The students must be able to sense and feel what the things radiate, what they give off.

The minor intervention cannot be confined to merely being sensitive to the students' needs. It is much more complicated than that. Minor interventions, and those responsible for implementing them, must consider their impact on the students. Through critical reflection and an understanding of the students' responses, they must respond appropriately. For minor intervention to be effective, they must involve some form of iterative, constantly adjusted feedback loop and in this way constitute a reciprocal and repetitive responsiveness (Author, 2023). In order to respond to the students' needs and movements, the corridor intervention can be further enhanced by involving them in a fine-tuning process. As the vice principal told us: "It's also a way of giving them a voice, and yes, if you want to create competent citizens [...] who have something to say. Then you have to, you have no choice but to listen to them once in a while." The vice principal suggests that, in his experience, students are rarely listened to. The noise they create is noticed, but their voices often go unheard. This is precisely what the school is attempting to address. In other words, they are striving to establish a reciprocal and iterative method of responding to the students. If the mood is to change, and if the intervention is to succeed in changing the atmosphere in the corridor from "death row" to "study row," the students must *want* that themselves.

Hopeful things do not imply a singular imagination or promise. Instead, they imply "clusters of promises" (Berlant, 2011) with potentially conflicting content and directions. The curious thing about hopefulness and the imaginaries that invoke it is that hope is always intertwined with anxiety. Like hope, anxiety has to do with anticipating what is to come, what is on the way, or what might happen. Perhaps something pleasant, joyful, or nice, or perhaps something uncomfortable, dangerous, painful, or sad. It is precisely this ambivalence at the heart of diversity

work that the concept of “hopeful things” helps bring to the fore. There are things one hopes for when working with diversity, both pedagogically and managerially, and there are also things one fears. Hopeful things embody the hope that taking certain actions will lead to improvement, positivity, and happiness, but also the fear that inactivity may result in stagnation or that the proposed interventions potentially worsen the situation.

When examining the corridor minor intervention as intertwined with anxiety, it becomes clear that the “hopeful things” not only entail caring *for* racially minoritized students, and thus wanting something *for* them, but also caring *about* them and thus wanting something specific *with* them (for more on this distinction, see, e.g., Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). For example, getting them not to make unnecessary noise, take up too much space, or take up the space in the wrong ways. These affective investments in diversity work also draw energy from the contemporary public and political atmosphere. This minor intervention took place in a high school that, like elementary schools and educational institutions in general, was increasingly subject to a national imperative placing the concept of "Danishness" as a benchmark and guiding principle. The minor interventions were conducted within a particular national political context that promises to redistribute high school students according to parental income; and where comprehensive so-called “ghetto plan policies” (Lundsteen, 2023; Risager, 2023) and security packages directly target young people in particular racialized minorities, some of whom were enrolled at this high school. Thus, the minor interventions observed in this study were also mood interventions in multicultural “contact zones” (Pratt, 1991) in which racially minoritized students and their educators meet in a context of unequal power relations deriving from migration, wars, and refugee flows, all entangled in (post)colonial and advanced capitalist conditions. There was anxiety as to whether the atmosphere in the corridor might develop into an unsafe, malign feeling permeating the entire school. There was likewise concern as to whether that atmosphere would resonate with the politicized discourse outside the school, where words like “immigrant high school” and “ghetto high school” circulate ready to attach themselves to schools. It is these kinds of labels that the school wanted to avoid—as did the students. Such labels can have a negative impact on student enrollment (among both minority and majority students), parental confidence, and, not least, draw the attention of political figures or even result in political interventions.

Conclusion

In this article, we sought to explore the ways in which educators engage in what we refer to as “minor interventions” within diversity work as atmospheric work in a Danish high school. Analyzing the educators’ narratives, we saw how the so-called death row of the corridor was turned into a positive study environment through the use of more-than-human actors and forces in the form of highly concrete things, such as books and bookshelves. We have shown how this intervention reproduced racialized affects while at the same time creating spaces for a responsive pedagogy of change and inclusion. On the one hand, the intervention reproduced the processes of racialization by homogenizing racialized minority groups whose mere presence threatened a positive and desirable school atmosphere. On the other hand, such interventions are built on hopes of a better future for these same students and a desire to protect the school's reputation

from the dominant public narrative.

To examine the minor intervention as an example of diversity work as atmospheric work, we reformulated Ahmed's concepts of happy objects as hopeful things. We employed a diffractive reading, reconsidering the concept of happy objects through its translation into the Danish language and Danish educational context. We did so in order to underscore the importance of adapting theoretical frameworks to suit the specificities of different linguistic, cultural, and racial contexts. We argued that, by making such adjustments, we can advance theories that have relevance in a wide range of settings, times, and places. Specifically, we argued that hope is a better word than happy when applied in educational contexts. This choice of terminology emphasizes the temporal progression towards the future without foreknowledge of how it will unfold—there exists only the guiding force of hope. Furthermore, the diffractive reading of the meanings of the Old Norse word *ting* and the feminist new materialist reformulation of objects as "things" enabled us to imbue these objects with more agential qualities. By reframing our perspective through this lens, we were able to discern how these "things" do not passively exist but actively participate in shaping the educational environment and the experiences of both educators and students.

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