The Precariat as Place

A Literary History of the Danish Ghetto

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Abstract
This article provides the Danish official policy on 'ghettoes' with a literary prehistory and in doing so makes the argument that the present-day conception of 'ghettoes' as by definition linked to non-western immigrants is only the latest in a long line of figurations. Danish fiction and poetry from the 1960s to the present day on the design, building and habitation of modernist mass housing projects tell a three-chapter story of recession. High hopes and an ambition to remedy class barriers in the sixties give way to despair and a reconfiguration of class society during the seventies. Built for both the working class and the middle class, the estates gradually, not least in the public imagination, become the epitome of a precarious existence on the margins of society. When immigrants arrive because of globalisation, the Danish welfare state moves them into an existing social architecture, figuratively as well as non-figuratively speaking. In this contemporary context the article charts site-specific conceptions of class and gender before suggesting – by way of Bruno Latour and Manuel DeLanda – new answers to the question: 'What is a ghetto?'

Keywords
the precariat, Danish 'ghettoes', Danish literature, non-places, heterotopia, Actor-Network Theory

According to the British sociologist Beverley Skeggs, 'Geographical referencing is one of the contemporary short-hand ways of speaking class' (Skeggs 2004: 15). Inseminated into a Danish context this would give birth to the suggestion that the official strategy against 'parallel societies', with its annually updated listings of 'almene boligområder' (non-profit housing estates), deserving the contested 'ghetto' term is a contemporary way of speaking the precariat. Using Danish literature from the mid-1960s to the present, this article argues that this is indeed so – and that it is not a new phenomenon. Contemporary Danish ghettoes are the outcomes of long-term currents in Danish post-war history rather than only the result of more recent waves of immigration.[1]

Danish fiction and poetry on the design, building and habitation of modernist mass housing projects tell a three-chapter story of recession. High hopes and an ambition to remedy class barriers in the 1960s give way to despair and a reconfiguration of class society during the 1970s. Built for both the working class and the middle class, the estates gradually, not least in the public imagination, become the epitome of a precarious existence on the margins of society. When immigrants arrive because of globalisation, the Danish welfare state moves them into an existing social architecture, figuratively as well as non-figuratively speaking. Danish ghettoes are, well, very Danish, even though much of this story runs parallel to what happens in other Western, not least other Scandinavian, countries.[2]

Politicians, scholars, international as well as Danish, and residents from Danish social housing estates have strongly criticised the official use of the ghetto term (as well as the plan itself). Even though the political, vernacular and scholarly arguments are convincing, I stick with the term. My first section explains this paradox. The next three sections tell the story of Danish estates as seen from Danish literature, the third highlighting the importance of gender in understanding Danish literature dealing with ghettoes.

Defining the ghetto

The ghetto phenomenon originated with the segregation of Jews in Europe from the late middle ages and onwards. The term seems to stem from the island on which the Venetian Republic, as of 29 March 1516, compelled the city's Jews to live. It had previously been occupied by a copper foundry and was known as *Ghetto Nuovo*: the word *gettare* means to throw or cast (for further discussion see Schwartz 2019). The term was later applied to Afro-American inner-city

areas in the USA and, after the Second World War, to areas of modernist mass housing in European suburbs (Haynes and Hutchison 2008, Høghøj 2019) – areas often populated by Muslim immigrants and interpreted through the global influence of rap in general and the ghetto term in particular. In his authoritative *Ghetto. The History of a Word*, American historian Daniel B. Schwartz sums up this story of dissemination thus:

> For all this globalization of the term, the word *ghetto* has arguably become central to the collective memory and identity of only one other people beyond Jews: the African American experience is the only other case in which *ghetto* has truly acquired keyword status (Schwartz 2019: 7)

While this seem to be a reasonable conclusion in a global perspective, it is debatable in a Danish context – given that the percentage of immigrants and descendants from non-Western countries in a housing area is one of the criteria in the official definition of a ghetto. Levels of criteria concerning crime rates and income, education and employment define whether a housing estate is considered an underprivileged housing area (*udsat boligområde*). If such an area meets these criteria *and* has over fifty per cent of inhabitants with a non-western background, it is officially defined as a ghetto. If a housing area is on the ghetto list for four years, it is considered a 'hard ghetto' (*hårdt ghettoområde*). Whether these official definitions make the ghetto term 'central to a people' can be debated, but they certainly give the ghetto term 'keyword status' in a Danish context.

The Danish history of the term can be divided into three successive discourses (Freiesleben 2016). The historical discourse has to do with the long European history of segregation of Jews; the American discourse has to do with urban segregation of Afro-Americans in the US; the present discourse is the immigrant discourse, the one manifested not least in the official ghetto definition with its focus on immigrants from non-western countries.

The French sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2008) distinguishes sharply between the USA and Europe as well as between deprived urban areas in present day US and the original ghettoes. He suggests a terminological triad to make this clear. In *the black ghetto* or *the communal ghetto*, Afro-Americans were confined in certain inner-city areas. These ghettoes had their own institutions, parallel to the ones in white mainstream USA, and were characterised by ethnic homogeneity as well as cultural self-awareness. The USA no longer has

this kind of ghetto. The *hyperghetto* is the utterly dismal outcome of the precarisation of the labour market and a systematic withdrawal of public institutions from the black inner-city areas in the last decades of the twentieth century. The five seasons of the television series *The Wire* (2002-2008) depicts different aspects of life in the poverty-stricken and war-like zones Wacquant designates with the term *hyperghetto*. The series also suggests, very much *à la* Wacquant, that the emergence of hyperghettoes has everything to do with politics and that 'punitive management of marginality' is at the core of these politics (See Wacquant 2014).

The reasons for characterising the European counterparts as *anti-ghettoes* are obvious against this background. Even if the some of the historical context is the same – neoliberalism and precarisation – European deprived areas are very different from American ones. They are found in the suburbs; their boundaries are highly permeable; though serious indeed, the social problems are less extreme; they are culturally heterogenous; and the welfare state is very much present. These points are very much in harmony with the literary texts mentioned in this article. For one thing, all of them, in one way or another, testify to the importance of welfare state personnel in Danish social housing areas. This simple fact questions the official Danish equation that ghetto equals *parallelsamfund* (parallel society).

In Sebastian Bune's 2017 coming-of-age novel *Min familie* (My Family) his young protagonist observes: 'Vores klasselærer siger, at Rosenhøj er en ghetto, og forklarer det med, at børnene ligner hinanden og snakker ens, men det passer ikke. Der bliver talt over tyve forskellige sprog i Rosenhøj.' (Bune 2017: 25) (Our class teacher says that Rosenhøj is a ghetto and explains this with the fact that the children look like each other and talk in the same way, but it's not true. Over twenty different languages are spoken in Rosenhøj). This observation highlights the factual heterogeneity of the estate of Rosenhøj and pits this against the *territorialisation* involved in the hegemonic ghetto discourse (see below). It also suggests – in the rendering of the teacher's discreetly jingoist attitude – what is a key point for Wacquant: *territorial stigmatisation* where the address functions as a social and racial stigma.[3] Territorial stigmatisation is a barrier for any interaction between people in a stigmatised area and the outside world. However, it also works along internal lines, inducing self-hatred in the children of the ghetto as well as social anomie among them.

Waquant's arguments are convincing and the fact of territorial stigmatisation is a heavy objection against the Danish policy of

defining and listing non-profit housing estates on an annually updated ghetto list.[4] Using the term ghetto without quotation marks in academia would seem to add insult to injury. My argument for sticking with the ghetto term is simply that it is there. Not only in the Danish public as well as the official lingo, but also in the literary texts that I work with (not to mention television, film and hip-hop). I follow the actors in this respect – to speak with Bruno Latour – and can only hope that bringing out what literary actors do contributes to a better understanding of the phenomena we collect under the contested term of 'ghetto'.

So again: What is a ghetto? The Danish state seems certain: a ghetto is a non-profit housing area that lives up to the official definition with its combination of physical, social and ethnic criteria. It would seem that a ghetto is made out of certain buildings and certain people living in these buildings, forming a parallel society. One way of criticising the Danish ghetto strategy would be to say that really, it is the ghetto plan that makes ghettoes out of contemporary social problems; ghettoes are 'constructions'.

I might agree with this last bit, but only if we include more makers – and think of construction in material terms. A ghetto is a good example of an actor-network where human and nonhuman actors 'construct' a phenomenon (Latour 2005, 2013). Important actors in creating a contemporary Danish ghetto would seem to be for instance concrete, housing blocks, visions and disappointed hopes for the welfare state, builders, planners and architects, politicians, policies and institutions, inhabitants, immigration, vandals, gang members, journalists, scholars and writers of other kinds such as literary ones. As the successive ghetto plans and lists suggest, it takes a lot of work every day from all these actors and more to uphold the existence of a ghetto.

A related way of conceptualising the ghetto would be to think of a ghetto as an assemblage in Manual DeLanda's sense (2016). Ignoring the differences between an actor-network and an assemblage I will focus on two important aspects of DeLanda's revamping of Deleuze and Guattari's original work on this concept. He suggests that assemblages are of different sorts according to the value of two parameters: the extent of *coding* determines whether we are dealing with an assemblage made up of relations of interiority – defining 'the very identity of the terms that they relate' (DeLanda 2016: 2) – or relations of exteriority – such as ecological symbioses where the 'relation is not necessary but only contingently obligatory, a relation

that does not define the very identity of the symbionts' (3). The second parameter concerns

> territorialisation, a parameter measuring the degree to which the components of the assemblage have been subjected to a process of homogenisation, and the extent to which its defining boundaries have been delineated and made impermeable. (ibid)

'Re-assembling' the ghetto in Latour's sense – i.e. understanding the work and the actors that go into the continued making of the ghetto – could begin with assessments of these parameters: who and what contributes to enhanced coding (social homogenisation, stigmatisation and creation of destructive subcultures for instance) and territorialisation (closing of boundaries between the estate and the surroundings)? It would seem that the official strategy against ghettoes is haunted by an inherent paradox: doesn't applying special laws and other measures in certain deprived areas risk increasing the level of coding and thus territorialisation and bring Danish ghettoes closer to the historical Jewish ghettoes with their special institutions and legislation?

Be this as it may, the flat ontology of materialist theories such as Latour's and DeLanda's involves a promising solution to classic problems concerning the relation between, in this case, certain areas and the cultural representation of these areas. On a par with many other agents such as concrete, housing policy and inhabitants, literary texts are active in the assemblages that make up Danish ghettoes. The literary history I am charting here is an aspect of the complex dynamics between estates, welfare society and cultural products such as literature that have assigned this particular kind of housing area a specific location on the map of contemporary Danish class society.

Working class areas and estates

In Jonas T. Bengtsson's realist novel *Submarino* (2007) we follow two brothers living precarious lives in Copenhagen districts whose names have become synonymous with social segregation (in real life as in the novel). Nick lives in Nordvest (North West), whereas his brother dwells in Tingbjerg. One day Nick pays him a visit:

> Jeg tager bussen ud af byen. Forbi Brønshøj Torv, videre ud af byen, bussen snegler sig af sted langs mosen. Her skiller byen, fra villakvartererne i Brønshøj til Tingbjerg, en arkitekts våde drøm, der endte som den største

> samling arbejdsløse indvandrere og alkoholikere. Byens yderste udkant. (Bengtsson 2007: 150)
>
> (I take a bus out of the city. Past Brønshøj Torv, further out, the bus moves at a snail's pace along the bog. This is where the city separates, from the residential areas of Brønshøj to Tingbjerg, the wet dream of an architect that ended up as the largest collection of immigrants and alcoholics. The outermost outskirts.)

The quote demonstrates that 'geographical referencing is one of the contemporary short-hand ways of speaking class'. It also shows that there is a difference between referring to socially segregated working-class areas in general and referring to the kind of areas of which Tingbjerg is an example: large areas of modernist mass housing structured by a strong tension between well-meant design in the modernist tradition and present-day precarisation. We will take the bus with Nick; this article is about estates like Tingbjerg rather than older and more loosely defined working-class areas like Nordvest. Non-profit housing estates with more than 1000 inhabitants make up the official list of *udsatte boligområder* (underprivileged housing areas) – 'ghettoes' are a subgroup of this list. But housing estates are what is meant when people in general use the term ghetto, and housing estates have a small but significant literary history.

Present-day disputes over the ghetto term are related to older quarrels. I will chart a fundamental change of mood in the conception of the estates with blocks of flats built in the post-war era; literature is my key source, but not the only one. To get a grip on these changes I divide them into three tropes and name these after the material of concrete with which the blocks were built: the white concrete of the 1960s boom economy, the grey concrete of the recession in the 1970s, and the grey-brown concrete emerging at the close of the twentieth century. The tropes do seem to follow one another but are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are competing conceptions. When present-day estate inhabitants try to voice their satisfaction with the place they live and their dissatisfaction with the public discolouring of their home, they are the latest combatants in a decades-old and highly asymmetrical battle over the colour of the concrete.

White concrete

The fracture surface between two opposing conceptions of the new estates around 1970 is clearly visible in an eye-opening article by two

young historians (Høghøj and Holmquist 2018). Their point of departure is the fact that the newspaper *BT* in 1970 awarded one of today's ghetto areas, Gellerupplanen in Aarhus, a price for being 'Årets kønneste by' (Prettiest City of the Year). Because of the radical change of attitude towards estates such as Gellerupplanen taking place in the same years, it is worth looking at a longer quote from the prize committee's motivation:

> Det er en by planlagt med tanke på beboernes trivsel. Derfor er den kørende trafik adskilt fra den gående. Derfor er der tilført byen en række fællesskabscentre. Den får eget teater, eget gæstehotel, indkøbscenter med overdækkede gader, store sports- og motionsarealer, indbydende kratbevoksede legelommer for børnene i lange slugter i dalene mellem boliger, hvor beboerne kan flytte vægge, danne rum og hvor de har store lyse altaner. Der er bodega og kollegium. Unge og gamle i skøn forening i store og små boliger. Plads til syge og handicappede mellem de raske. Det er blot nogle af de ting, der har gjort BTs valg af Gellerup som Danmarks kønneste by let. For en by er ikke blot køn på grund af idylliske gader, toppede brosten, gamle huse, bindingsværk og stokroser. En by kan i langt højere grad være køn, fordi den er tænkt køn, smukt, varmt og menneskeligt. Det er Gellerup. (Høghøj and Holmquist 2018: 129)
>
> (It is a new city planned with a focus on the wellbeing of the inhabitants. Therefore, the traffic has been separated from pedestrians. Therefore, the city has been supplied with a broad range of community centres. It will have its own theatre, own guest-hotel, a mall with arcaded streets, large sports- and exercise-areas, and inviting shrub-covered play-pockets for the children in the valleys between the apartments where inhabitants can move walls, create spaces, and where they have large, bright balconies. There are pubs and dorms. Young and old people in perfect harmony living in large and small dwellings. With room for the ill and handicapped amongst the healthy. These are just some of the reasons why the selection of Gellerup as Denmark's prettiest city has been easy. Because a city

> is not just pretty because of idyllic streets, cobblestones, old timbered houses, and hollyhocks. A city can be much prettier if it is conceived as pretty, beautiful, warm, and humane. That is the case with Gellerup.) (Translation Høghøj 2019: 5, edited for clarity)

From the estate as a whole to the individual apartments, Gellerup is praised for its progressively functionalist focus on the wellbeing of the inhabitants rather than prettiness in an ordinary and sentimental sense. The committee discreetly suggests that Gellerup, because of the way it is designed and the number of common facilities, will bring together different kinds of people. Class is not mentioned – *BT* is a tabloid tending to the right wing – but the drift of the prize motivation is close to a social democratic conception of the welfare state as a means to giving the working-class better living conditions and generally remedy still existing class barriers. It is safe to think of the well-planned estate as a metaphor for the Danish welfare state as such. The quote does not directly mention the material that makes it possible to build such an estate – concrete, of course – but just like the word 'class' it is present between the lines, not least in the cadence of the quote with its discreetly polemic opposition between old-fashioned and possibly fake conceptions of urban idyll and a modern sense of beauty based on a rational focus on the needs of the inhabitants. The material of concrete carries the same metaphorical meaning as the estate as a whole, and I will term this optimistic complex of meaning *the white concrete*.

While it is well-documented that planners and politicians of not least the 1960s shared this vision, it is not always easy to find literature with edification and optimism.[5] The sober 'Welfare realism' (Kjældgaard 2018) of Anders Bodelsen with its insistent interest in life in the new areas of the modern welfare state does, though, occasionally depict modern flats and high-rise blocks as a form of pragmatic utopia. Bodelsen's interests in modern suburbia and contemporary middle-class life seem (Kjældgaard 2018: 266) aligned with the French anthropologist Marc Augé's concept 'non-place'. 'If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity', Augé writes, 'then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place' (Augé 1995: 77-8). For Bodelsen, the places of 'supermodernity' – Augé's term – such as the airport, the highway intersection or the

estate are by no means without ambivalence, but they do contain a utopian openness towards the future.

In the story 'Lejligheden' (The Flat) from *Drivhuset* (1965) (The Greenhouse) we meet a young couple who involuntarily spend a weekend in a flat on the fourteenth floor of a half-finished high-rise. This place lacks any anchoring in the larger history of Denmark as well as any relation to their own lives and can be characterised as a non-place. In the first lines they cheat their way past the builders and say to each other: 'Man skal bare se *ud* som om man hører til. Man skal bare tro på det' (Bodelsen 1965: 121) (You only have to *look* as if you belong. You just have to believe it). When the builders return on Monday and the elevator works again, the narrator authoritatively finishes the story with these words: 'Murerne kiggede langt efter dem da de kom ud forneden med et umiskendeligt præg af at høre til' (131) (The builders looked at them carefully as they came out at the bottom with an unmistakable air of belonging). In other words, a couple of days was all it took them to convert a non-place to a place of their own. The lack of relations and history come with sombre undertones, but the almost finished and never-lived-in flat does provide a pragmatically utopian potentiality beyond personal, social and societal ties. It is a sheet of white paper on which the young couple can write their own stories.

Grey concrete

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the optimistic conception of the new estates was reversed in a distinctly dystopian trope I will name *The grey concrete*. The 1970s abound with gloomy descriptions of the estates, and the material of concrete seems to epitomise the negative feelings now associated with these areas. This is visible in the fact that *beton* (concrete) became and still is a negative prefix. Some of the new words pertain to the estates and the blocks themselves such as *betonslum* (concrete slum) and *betonkasse* (concrete box). Other examples show that the negative feelings associated with concrete make 'beton-' a productive prefix with a meaning that *Den Danske ordbog* states as: 'stiv og urokkelig; domineret af vanetænkning; dogmatisk om person eller holdning, oftest i politisk sammenhæng' (rigid and ironbound, dominated by habitual thinking, dogmatic about a person or position, most often in a political context.) You can be a *betonkommunist* (concrete communist) as well as *betonlebbe* (concrete dyke).

This critical attitude had older roots among architects, but it was popularised around 1970 and got a strong foothold in academia, too

(Høghøj 2019: 178ff). 'Prøv blot at se hvad der sker midt i vor by København' (Do take a look at what's happening in the middle of our city Copenhagen) urged the singer John Mogensen in his successful 1971 debut as a solo artist: 'Der er noget galt i Danmark' (There is something wrong in Denmark).[6] 'Hæslige kasser skyder op, nu er turen også kommet til det kære Christianshavn', the song continues (hideous boxes sprout, our beloved Christianhavn is next). This juxtaposition of a traditional inner-city working-class area of Copenhagen and new types of buildings and, not least, whole new quarters in the suburbs was one basic thematic structure of a long-running and hugely popular television series that took place in and was named after the very same Christianshavn: *Huset på Christianshavn* (DR, 1970-77) (The House on Christianshavn) (See Høghøj 2019: 140ff).

Even in literature, the depressing social housing estate became a dystopia, a place with a fixed signification of social deprivation, hopelessness, crime and – not least – very bad surroundings for growing up in. Michael Buchwald's *Blokland* (1975) (Block Land) is a Marxist analysis of a modern Danish housing estate in the form of an experimental mock-documentary multi-protagonist novel. Bent Haller's youth novel *Katamaranen* (1976) (The Catamaran) is a shockingly brutal tale of a young boy whose move with his parents from rural surroundings to what his father calls 'betonlort' (concrete shit) forms the beginning of a downfall into crime and violent sexuality.

John Nehm's realist collection of short stories *Vær lidt social mand*! (Be a little social, man!,1980) charts the everyday consequences of the fragmentation of the Danish working class in the late 1970s. In 'Tak for en dejlig aften' (Thank you for a lovely evening) a younger working-class couple move from inner city slum to new quarters built of concrete in the suburbs. 'Jeg havde ikke på fornemmelsen at det var et arbejderkvarter dette her', the young man observes (Nehm 1980: 12) (I didn't get the feeling that this was a working-class area). This points to a forgotten layer of meaning, namely the fact that a good deal of the 1960s and 70s estates were meant for and inhabited by the middle class. In the short story by Bodelsen I mentioned earlier, the young man explains his girlfriend that the flat they visit is built for 'rige svin' (Bodelsen 1965: 95) (rich pigs). However, in 'Tak for en dejlig aften' the fact that parts of the working class turn middle class is linked with other aspects of the grey concrete trope: namely a depressing lack of real contact between the inhabitants of the new estate and thus a lack of traditional working-class solidarity. Tage

Skou-Hansen's 1987 novel *Krukken og stenen* (The Stone and the Jar) is more in line with the general conception of concrete as a container of precarious life. It tells the story of an architect who designs a fictional estate that clearly has Gellerupplanen as a model. His 1960s dream of providing affordable and yet carefully designed flats for the working class turns into the 1970s reality of concrete slum inhabited by the precariat.

In *Urban Outcasts*, Loïc Wacquant links the fragmentation of the working class (in the US also resulting in class segregation among Afro-Americans) to large-scale changes brought about by the transition from the Fordist to the post-Fordist regime, and it is probably safe to say that the 'geographical referencing' at the heart of the grey concrete trope is a way of speaking class at this particular moment in time, a way of speaking about precarisation of the labour market and thus of working class lives. The grey concrete trope also seems to condense general feelings of uncertainty connected to the recession in the 1970s as well as an unease with the welfare state as a fully realised project. This would align Denmark with an international tendency that the German historian Christiane Reinecke sums up thus: 'Housing, in short, became a priority area for debates on the gaps in and problems of the welfare state in general – and on social deprivation in particular' (Reinecke 2015: 561).

Even if the grey concrete trope does refer to historical changes on many levels that need addressing, it is worth considering (as Skeggs 2004 does) whether speaking about class through speaking about place is the right way to go about it. For one thing, it would seem that inhabitants of Danish estates from 1970 to present day ghetto plans face the everyday consequences of large-scale historical changes in the form of increased social segregation and precarisation. At the same time, the stereotyping of the grey concrete trope also make them potential victims of classist territorial stigmatisation. Even if the intentions behind, say, a novel describing an estate as society's rubbish dump are good, doesn't such a novel run the risk of implying that people actually living there are rubbish? Another question concerns the architectural determinism lurking in the grey concrete trope. In *Katamaranen,* the boy Peter moves from nice green surroundings where children play to the grey reality of an estate where they do not:

> Han blev altid mærkelig indeni når han kørte hen til det høje hus. Han vidste ikke hvorfor han blev så mærkelig til mode. Det var som om han var ked af et eller andet. Men han fortalte aldrig

> til nogen når han var ked af noget, for han ville gerne være stor og modig dreng. (Haller 1976: 13)
>
> (Riding his bike towards the high building always made him feel strange inside. He did not know why he felt so strange. It was as if something had made him sad. He never told anyone when he was sad about something, though, because he wanted to be a big and brave boy.)

Even if the novel as a whole places the reality of the tough neighbourhood in a larger context, quotes such as this one seem to suggest that the bad vibes emanate from the buildings themselves, and thus that the problems in the area have their roots in the area and the buildings themselves. This determinism is a form of territorialisation and a drift that runs contra to the explicit intention of the novel: protesting against the spatial segregation taking place in this mid 1970s that turn a Danish estate into a local articulation of Danish class society.

The territorialisation of Danish housing estates increased as the grey concrete was ethnified in the public debates concerning Danish ghettoes as Muslim 'parallel societies' from the 1990s and onwards (see Freiesleben 2016: 61ff). The next section does not deal directly with these debates in general but focuses specifically on the literary articulation of a new concrete trope, based on the older one. This literary articulation condenses some of the same problems as hegemonic versions of this new trope, but the problems are seen from different perspectives, not least from inside the estates.

The grey-brown concrete

Tarek Omar's *MuhamDANEREN* (The MuhameDANE, 2011) contains allegorical as well as realist short stories about different immigrant groups in Denmark. Now and then blocks of concrete appear; that is how many of the protagonists live. The paratext of the book mentions that Omar himself grew up in a social housing estate in Vejle and that much of his material for the book comes from those years. In the story 'Kvinderne fra jernstøberiet' (The women from the iron foundry) these blocks are more than realist background; they symbolise social control in a group of young Muslim families:

> Lysegrå betonsten var stablet oven på hinanden i tusindvis. Det var det eneste, jeg så. Planmæssige, firkantede betonbrikker spredt i lige rækker – en efter

> en som ubetydelige legoklodser i en uoverskuelig uendelighed. Betonbygningen var vores hjem. Det var her, vi boede. I hver lejlighed var der to firkantede glasvinduer – et i stuen og et i køkkenet – som beboerne kunne bruge, når dagene blev alt for betonprægede (Omar 2011: 109)
>
> (Light grey stones of concrete were stacked on top of each other by the thousands. It was all I saw. Planned, square pieces of concrete spread out in straight lines – one after the other as Lego bricks in one confusing infinity. The concrete building was our home. That was where we lived. Each apartment had two square windows – one in the living room and one in the kitchen – to be used by the inhabitants when the days became too concrete-like.)

The women devise a common strategy against the confinement to the area that their traditionalist husbands have enforced: they dress up sexily every night but deny their husbands access to their bodies. This breaks down the husbands' resistance and the ban against leaving the area is lifted.

In a way, we are in well-known territory here. 'Concrete' is still in operation as a negative prefix; the blocks in their familiar greyness function as reliable symbolic containers for negative feelings of depression and confinement; and the area as a whole has everything to do with segregation.[7] However, the symbolic content of the estate, the blocks and the concrete has nothing to do with the ethnically Danish proletariat and precariat. The concrete discreetly epitomises the marginalisation of immigrants in a larger context and, more directly, patriarchal repression at the level of the lives of the young Muslim women. The fact of immigration has clearly altered the existing trope of the grey concrete so that its old negative contents can be used in connection with interpretations of the lives of *nydanskere* (new Danes).

It is with some hesitation that I have chosen the term 'The grey-brown concrete'. The inspiration for the term comes from Geeti Amiri's personal coming of age narrative *Glansbilleder* (Picture Perfect, 2016). Amiri uses terms like the brown patriarchy and the brown underclass in a descriptive manner. My hesitation obviously stems from the fact that 'grey' in this context has negative connotations whereas 'brown' decidedly does not. 'Brown' is an attempt to refer to the fact of new

inhabitants in the state of Denmark with brown skin. In the grey-brown concrete, the class-specific dreariness of the grey concrete is combined with aspects of immigrants' (and their descendants') lives in Danish estates. The term has the advantage of pointing to the long struggle over the colour of concrete in Denmark as well as to the fact that contemporary Danish estates are culturally heterogeneous.

An exception to dystopian rule?

This absence of homogeneity is obvious in the fact that some of the most widely discussed depictions of life in Danish estates from the last decade do not deal with brown people at all.This goes for Karina Pedersen's *Helt ude i hampen. Mails fra underklassen* (Right out in the sticks: Emails from the underclass, 2016) – a highly controversial book consisting of allegedly authentic emails between the author and a nameless friend about the housing estate Korskærparken in Fredericia where they both grew up – as well as *Prinsesser fra blokken* (Princesses from the block), a hugely popular documentary in four parts about a group of young Danish women living in various Copenhagen estates (DR 2016) (see Haarder, Simonsen and Schwartz 2018). Camilla Christensen's *Jorden under Høje Gladsaxe* (The ground beneath Høje Gladsaxe, 2002) does have a brown person or two, but the novel connects the very real estate of Høje Gladsaxe to both the history of the Danish welfare state as well as to ancient mythological layers. Hassan Preisler's autofictive novel *Brun mands byrde* (Brown man's burden, 2013) plays out in the middle class; no buildings of concrete here, let alone areas on the ghetto list.

However, most of what could be called Danish ghetto literature does link brown immigrants and grey blocks of concrete, whatever the colour of the author. This linkage is often specific and concerns the writer's own life in estates that can be found outside the books (and in some cases on the ghetto list). This goes for Yahya Hassan's unprecedentedly successful collection of poetry carrying his name from 2013 as well as coming-of-age autofictions such as Morten Pape's *Planen* (The plan, 2015) and Aydin Soei's *Forsoning. Fortælling om en familie* (Reconciliation. Tale of a family, 2016). Outside of fiction and poetry, we have seen a number of personal narratives about growing up in brown families situated in specific Danish housing estates such as Amiri's already mentioned *Glansbilleder* and Ahmad Mahmoud's *Sort Land. Fortællinger fra ghettoen* (Black Land. Stories from the ghetto, 2015). If we widen the focus, both Danish hip-hop and Danish TV and film routinely depict a connection between brown people and grey concrete. DR's drama series *Når støvet har lagt sig* (When the

dust has settled) is airing as this is being written. The series has a young Danish-Palestinian man as one of its many protagonists. He dwells in an area consisting of grey concrete blocks, an area – as is mentioned in the seventh episode – that is on the ghetto list.

Interestingly, director Fenar Ahmad's 2014 debut *Aekte vare* (The real thing – with multiethnolect spelling) takes place in Brøndby Strand among a diverse group of aspiring young rappers, but the protagonist – played by the talented Kian Rosenberg Larson aka Gilli – is ethnically Danish. This suggests that Danish ghettoes by now must be understood in terms of post-migration rather than migration: ethnic diversity is a fact, and the differences among inhabitants of Danish ghettoes might be of less importance than the difference between them and people on the outside. It is also well worth mentioning that *Aekte vare* – as opposed to most of the other texts I have mentioned – is *not* a tale of upwards mobility. Even if the story has some similarities with *8-Mile* (Curtis Hanson, USA, 2002), the protagonist does not use rapping as a way out. The ending of the film emphasises the link between the multicultural mix of people, Brøndby Strand's high rises of concrete and rapping as the foundation of the young rapper's true identity. Thus, the long dystopian tradition of the concrete tropes seems to be broken.

Class, gender and concrete

Aekte vare very much plays out *between men*. With one possible exception, women are either mothers or something to devour alongside vodka shots and drugs when partying. Late-modern cultural representations of Danish ghettoes in general demonstrate that class is articulated through gender and vice versa. The grey-brown concrete contains class- and site-specific articulations far from middle-class conceptions of gender influenced by feminism. This is Siri from *Prinsesser fra blokken*: 'Vores skønhedsidealer på Vestegnen, det er jo fake. Jo falskere jo bedre. Vi er pjattede med silibabser herude.' (*Prinsesser fra blokken*, episode 1) 'Our beauty ideals in Copenhagen West, well they are fake, the faker the better. We are crazy about silicone boobs out here). Needless to say, these ideals are very different to the expectations of a young Muslim woman that Geeti Amiri faces and disappoints in *Glansbilleder*. Less obvious is the built-in relation between the femininity of Siri and her fellow estate princesses and ruling middle-class norms according to which their 'beauty ideals' seem excessive – a form of gendered classism that is central to the work of Beverley Skeggs.

More often than not, family life in the ghettoes is depicted as dysfunctional in two distinct manners that I would term the crisis-ridden brown patriarchy and the crisis-ridden white patriarchy respectively. Amiri as well as Mahmoud, Hassan and Soei depict the brown patriarchy as ruled over by a explosively violent form of masculinity and link this with two factors: traumas from the fathers' refugee past and the clash between their marginalised position in their new country and ruling conceptions of masculinity in the culture in which they grew up. In Sara Omar's bestselling novels about systematic and extreme patriarchal violence in Muslim families the primary frame of explanation is Islam.

Karina Pedersen and *Prinsesser fra blokken* depict a white patriarchy where fathers are absent and/or characterised by what might be termed imploded masculinity – a reluctance or inability to live up to even the most minimal obligations of fatherhood. This is also very much what Morten Pape's *Planen* is about. After his parents' divorce, young Morten is completely let down by his weak father in, as he has it, 'et kvarter fyldt med enlige mødre, enker og børnepenge hver måned' (Pape 2015: 29) (a neighbourhood filled with single mothers, widows and child support every month). Judging by Wacquant's *Urban Outcasts*, this crisis-ridden white patriarchy might – ironically – be one aspect of Danish ghettoes that is rather like conditions in the American hyperghetto.

From non-place to heterotopia

One way of conceptualising the change from the utopian bend of the white concrete to the dystopian bend of the grey and the grey-brown concrete would be to think of it as a transition from Augé's non-places – in my semi-utopian revamping of that concept – to Foucault's heterotopias, his oft-quoted idea of 'counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' (Foucault 1984: 3). More specifically, I am thinking of the kind he calls 'heterotopias of deviation: those in which 'individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed.' (5). He suggests rest homes, psychiatric hospitals and prisons as examples, and I would add ghettoes to the list.[8]

Giving Foucault's well-worn concept yet another re-run is meant to highlight the fact that the really existing, inverted utopia of the ghetto stands in a functional relation to the surrounding society. The long history of the triangular dynamics between the welfare state, modernist mass housing and discursive formations (which we have

watched from a literary perspective) culminating with the massive state interventions of the present ghetto strategy, suggests that ghettoes are anything but parallel societies.

Obviously, the social problems of some Danish non-profit housing estates which the state interventions are supposed to remedy are anything but imaginary, and one has to be a strange reader of the texts I have mentioned to overlook that some of these problems are related to what Geeti Amiri has called the brown patriarchy. There is no way around the fact of spatial concentration of social problems here. However, applying the concept of heterotopia is meant to highlight the fact that the concentration of poor people in specific areas has to do with the whole of society, not the buildings, areas or members of the precariat in themselves. Ghettoes are – to speak with Butler (2004) and Lorey (2015) – part of a historically specific and highly unequal *distribution* of an ontological insecurity or precariousness.

This way of looking at things might help us to understand another question: what are we to make of the frequent linking in contemporary literature of autobiography, coming-of-age narratives, and specific housing estates around the country?[9] I would suggest that these narratives are attempts at personal sense-making of a precarious coming of age through a reversion of the history of heterotopias of deviation. According to Foucault, the heterotopias of deviation superseded an earlier form called crisis heterotopias, places for rites of passage such as the army or the boarding school, places where boys became men – and girls women. Re-telling a precarious childhood in the ghetto converts a heterotopia of deviation back to a crisis heterotopia by staging the ghetto as a tough scene on which upwards mobility, *Bildung* and integration take place, very often with welfare state personnel as helpers.

This tale takes place in the texts but writing and publishing the texts often has a profound influence on the life of the author as well – as if releasing a book amounts to a successful rite of passage, granting the young author leave of not only the ghetto as a physical space but also the precariat. These stories are about class and place in contemporary Denmark, but they also affect the position and the geographical location of the author in the same class society, raising well-known but difficult questions of authenticity and authority. Who can legitimately speak of and for the Danish ghetto?[10]

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Notes

[1] The ghetto strategy or plan bears the official title 'Ét Danmark uden parallelsamfund. Ingen ghettoer i 2030' (One Denmark without parallel societies. No ghettoes by 2030') It was passed in Parliament in November 2018 – with a very large majority including the Social Democratic Party. This party subsequently won the election in 2019 and upholds the laws of the strategy from the previous government, including the hotly contested demolishing of houses. See Transport og Boligministeriet 2019 for the latest lists and their

criteria. The strategy, the criteria used for defining a Danish 'ghetto' and some of the problems that the strategy creates are described in an article in The Local (2018). Winckler 2019 gives an overview over the many different laws involved in the anti-ghetto strategy.

[2] One very important difference is the specifics of the Danish non-profit housing sector which I will not be dealing with. See *BL* (n.d.) for an introduction.

[3] Even here, Wacquant finds a difference between Europe and the US. Having a home in the American hyperghetto is both a social and racial stigma, where as an address in a Parisian *banlieue* is primarily a social stigma (see chapter 6 of *Urban Outcasts*). It is worth considering whether this still holds up. My sense is that the boy in Bune's novel point to a stigmatisation that is both social and racial.

[4] See 'Symposion on the *Ghetto*' in *City & Community* 7:4 (December 2008) for criticism of Wacquant's work from fellow sociologists.

[5] Høghøj 2019 tells this story in a Danish context; for an international perspective, see Wakeman 2016.

[6] This link has a rough translation of the lyrics, and you can play the song, too: https://lyricstranslate.com/en/der-er-noget-galt-i-danmark-something-wrong-denmark.html

[7] The fact that the narrator thinks of the estate as an iron foundry links it with the deeper European history of the ghetto. The etymology of the term seems to have to do with the fact that the Jews of Venice were confined in an area near the *geto*, the iron foundry. See Schwartz 2019: 10.

[8] See also Reinecke 2015.

[9] Alvarez 2016 mentions a very long line of American 'Coming-of age-in-the-hood movies' and discusses the problems of the genre.

[10] See Haarder, Simonsen and Schwartz 2018.