Signs and Society (2025), 1–30
doi:10.1017/sas.2025.10030

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
HANKUK UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES

ARTICLE

A Semiotics of Coziness and Disappearing Night

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Abstract

This essay explores the Danish concept of *hygge*, commonly glossed as "coziness," as a structure of feeling attuned to particular qualities of light. It draws from an ethnographic study of Copenhagen Municipality's Climate Plan to build the world's first carbon-neutral capital. Homing in on one of the Climate Plan's inaugural initiatives—the LED (light-emitting diode) conversion of street lighting—it tracks how ambient intensities of *hygge* are swept up with both changing lightscapes and changing national demographics. Via a semiotics of social difference, I examine how changing qualities of artificial light are experienced as eroding culturally configured sensory comforts, and how this erosion is grafted onto a fear of the city's potentially diminishing "Danishness." This semiotic process is evidenced in the lamination of racialized anxieties about "non-Western immigrants" onto discomforts derived from energy-efficient lighting technologies, and the apparent intrusion of both into habit worlds of *hygge*. In Copenhagen, I show how a semiotic account of atmosphere illuminates the fault lines of the Danish racial imagination.

Keywords: affect; atmosphere; Denmark; infrastructure; race; semiotic ideology

Introduction

During the fall of 2016, a spate of puff pieces suddenly lit up the internet hyping the Danish concept of *hygge*, a term commonly translated as "coziness" and glossed as a relaxed and intimate atmosphere conjured through the creature comforts of the Danish home. Throughout my fieldwork in Copenhagen underway at the time, I collected these articles in a folder on my desktop called *hyggemania*. Headlines such as "Cocoa by Candlelight" and "How *Hygge* Can Help You Get Through Winter" index the sensory pleasures and ostensibly restorative powers of the cozy ambience. Stock photos of woolen-socked feet warming hearthside appear across the genre in iconic tableaux (Figure 1). Popular media reached peak *hyggemania* between the fall of 2016 and 17, during which time—in addition to countless articles—no fewer than 34 English-language books on the concept were published, consisting for the most part of glossy interior design spreads and craft and cookbooks, as well as an adult coloring book

Figure 1. Fireplace *hygge*. Photo by Valentyn Volkov, Alamy.

and even a novel. By June 2017, *hygge* had earned its own entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* after being shortlisted for Word of the Year, nestled alongside less convivial terms such as alt-right, Brexiteer, and—the 2016 winner—post-truth.

It is perhaps no accident that a cultural imaginary of cozy candlelit pleasures—which taps into the trope of Scandinavian welfare utopia—went viral during a year widely memeified as an existential dumpster fire. As the culture industry quickly moved on to cozy-adjacent structures of feeling,[1] it would be tempting to dismiss the *hygge* hype of 2016–17 as a lifestyle branding craze cannily deployed as an antidote to everything from bad lighting to political depression. Yet in Denmark, *hygge* is not just a lifestyle brand or wellness trend (although to be sure it has been monetized recently as both). *Hygge*, I will argue in this discussion, is a category of social distinction that invites larger questions concerning the techno- and ethnopolitics of energy transition. More precisely, it complicates progress narratives that valorize innovation as a shorthand for transformative social change (cf. Suchman 2011). This essay explores a sensory politics (Fennell 2011, 2015) of *hygge* as a normative orientation to qualities of light that, as I will show, illuminates the Danish racial imagination. To that end, it examines ambient intensities cohering around Copenhagen's recent conversion to LED—light-emitting diode—municipal lighting infrastructure. I home in on *hygge* as an aesthetic category swept up with both changing lightscapes and changing national demographics, and consider how an anthropology of atmosphere elucidates the politics of artifacts amid an urban built environment in flux (cf. Fox 2020). My aim is neither to advance a grand unified theory of coziness nor to reveal *hygge*'s "dark side"; I am concerned rather with domains of practice and experience through which *hygge* is coded

[1]Such as the Swedish *mysighet* and Finnish *kalsarikänni*, two emic concepts framed in popular media in the months following *hyggemania* as Swedish and Finnish "forms of *hygge*," respectively.

https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.10030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in systems of meaning and recruited in the service of various value projects. Since some technical know-how informs what follows, let me begin with a few specifications.

The Administration of Light

Ever since high-intensity gas discharge lamps—which include mercury, sodium, and metal halide—became commercially available in 1965, they have been integrated in street, stadium, and factory lighting throughout the industrialized world. Compared to the incandescent and low-pressure sodium vapor elements that preceded them, high-pressure sodium (HPS) vapor lamps afford better longevity and luminous efficacy yet achieve a color-rendering index of just 20 to 30 percent of the visible spectrum. For this reason, until the early-21st-century industrial urban nightscapes were rendered in sepia tones. As artificial lighting technologies become ever brighter, smarter, and cheaper, however, they are recalibrating urban sensory ecologies from sepia to technicolor.

LEDs have illuminated small-scale devices such as watches, radios, and calculators since the early 1960s yet have remained until relatively recently cost-prohibitive for large-scale implementation in built environments. This feat became possible in the late 2000s as significant investments in lighting research and development, spurred in part by the advent of the smartphone and tablet, hastened advances in artificial lighting technology. While transition to LEDs at scale currently requires three to four times the capital investment of conventional appliances, the former outperform the latter by 40–70 percent in energy efficiency and three to four times in lifespan and thus yield a substantial cost advantage over time.

LEDs are also capable of rendering 80–90 percent of the visible spectrum and thus enhancing nighttime visibility. Yet as transportation engineers have cautioned, they may in fact pose new traffic hazards due to the temporary blinding effects of heightened glare (Cai et al. 2021; Jiangbi et al. 2022). Within biomedicine, LEDs are further subject to growing concern about the potential health risks of long-term exposure to blue-spectrum light and attendant circadian dysregulation, which include among others insomnia, obesity, depression, retinal injury, migraine, and a possible link to breast cancer (Stevens et al. 2013; Walker et al. 2020). Beyond human health impacts, ecologists have documented the deleterious effects of increasing skyglow—the diffuse, artificial brightening of the night sky—on the circadian rhythms of flora and fauna within and around urban ecosystems (Kyba et al. 2017). In a recent paper (Sordello et al. 2022), researchers characterized the cascading harms of these effects, such as habitat loss and fragmentation, spatial disorientation, and plant-pollinator disruption as "an emergency for nocturnal biodiversity on Earth."

The intensification of artificial light at night (ALAN) moreover indexes the affordances of LED infrastructure as a technology of spatial inequality. In London, for instance, sociologists have argued that in the 21st century, darkness has become a luxury good largely limited to affluent, predominantly White[2] neighborhoods and historic

[2]Joining Eve Ewing (2020) and Nell Irvin Painter (2024), I capitalize White throughout to situate Whiteness within the American ideology of race and the socially ordering work of markedness. Whereas Blackness has historically been marked as "other" within this ideology, Whiteness has functioned as an

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sites (Sloane, Slater, and Entwistle 2016); a demand driven of late by the luxury housing market. In these areas, street lighting is artfully curated to stage tranquil atmospheres and preserve historic charm. Consider central London, where despite the city's recent LED conversion, some 1,500 gas lamps still burn as of 2025, illuminating the exterior of Buckingham Palace, the Royal Parks, and the Covent Garden shopping district.

Tranquil nightscapes are a privilege generally not afforded to low-income and racialized neighborhoods. In such districts, LEDs are often mobilized for invasive lighting interventions dubiously imputed to enhance public safety (Isenstadt, Neumann, and Petty 2015; Sloane 2021). As researchers have noted (Sloane, Slater, and Entwistle 2016), London's housing estates are conspicuous for their excessively bright and cold lighting calibrated for optimum visibility on CCTV (closed-circuit television) surveillance. In addition to exposing residents to the health risks of blue-spectrum light pollution, these installations mark the housing estates as deviant and threatening, staging them as unsavory spaces for unsavory people.

While the technology may have evolved, the weaponization of lighting is not new. Artificial outdoor lighting has been deployed as an instrument of social control and racialized surveillance since its inception in the 19th century (Schivelbusch 1987). In her historical account of the racial logics of surveillance practices and technologies, Simone Browne traces this genealogy beyond infrastructure to human bodies themselves in 18th-century New York, where so-called "lantern laws" required Black, Indigenous, and mixed-raced enslaved people to carry candle lanterns after sunset, unless accompanied by a White person (Browne 2015). Browne shows how the panoptic management of "black luminosity" via New York's lantern laws functioned as a "form of boundary maintenance occurring at the site of the black body, whether by candlelight, flaming torch, or the camera flashbulb that documents the ritualized terror of a lynch mob" (ibid, 67).

Despite the range of concerns and contested claims briefly cataloged here about the long-term safety and equity of LEDs, their superior energy efficiency profile has in recent years compelled municipal governments eager to curb carbon emissions and lower costs to invest in the systemic conversion of urban lighting infrastructure. Over the past decade-plus, a string of cities across Europe, Southeast Asia, Australia, and North America have done just that. Copenhagen joined this list in 2012.

As the inaugural initiative of Copenhagen Municipality's Climate Plan to become carbon-neutral by 2025 (Københavns Kommune 2012), approved by the City Council in August 2012,[3] the city elected to convert its aging network of some 44,000 HPS lamps, in place since the early 1970s, to LEDs. Over the next five years, 31,000 lightpoints within the network would be replaced with LED luminaires rendered in Danish design archetypes (Figures 2–4) (Københavns Kommune 2014). Because LEDs are

unmarked and therefore "default" racial category against which difference is constructed (Dyer 1997). On these axes of contrast, white people (lower case) are figured as universalized subjects without properties—"just human"—and by extension, people of color are marked as particular, other, and therefore raced. As Linda Waugh (1982) shows us, oppositional pairs do not merely describe a world; rather they summon into being a hierarchized relational matrix. Capitalizing Whiteness does not in itself change that hierarchy, but as Painter argues, it signals an intention to try.

[3]The Municipality allocated DKK 266.3 million (ca. USD 41.80 million) for the project.

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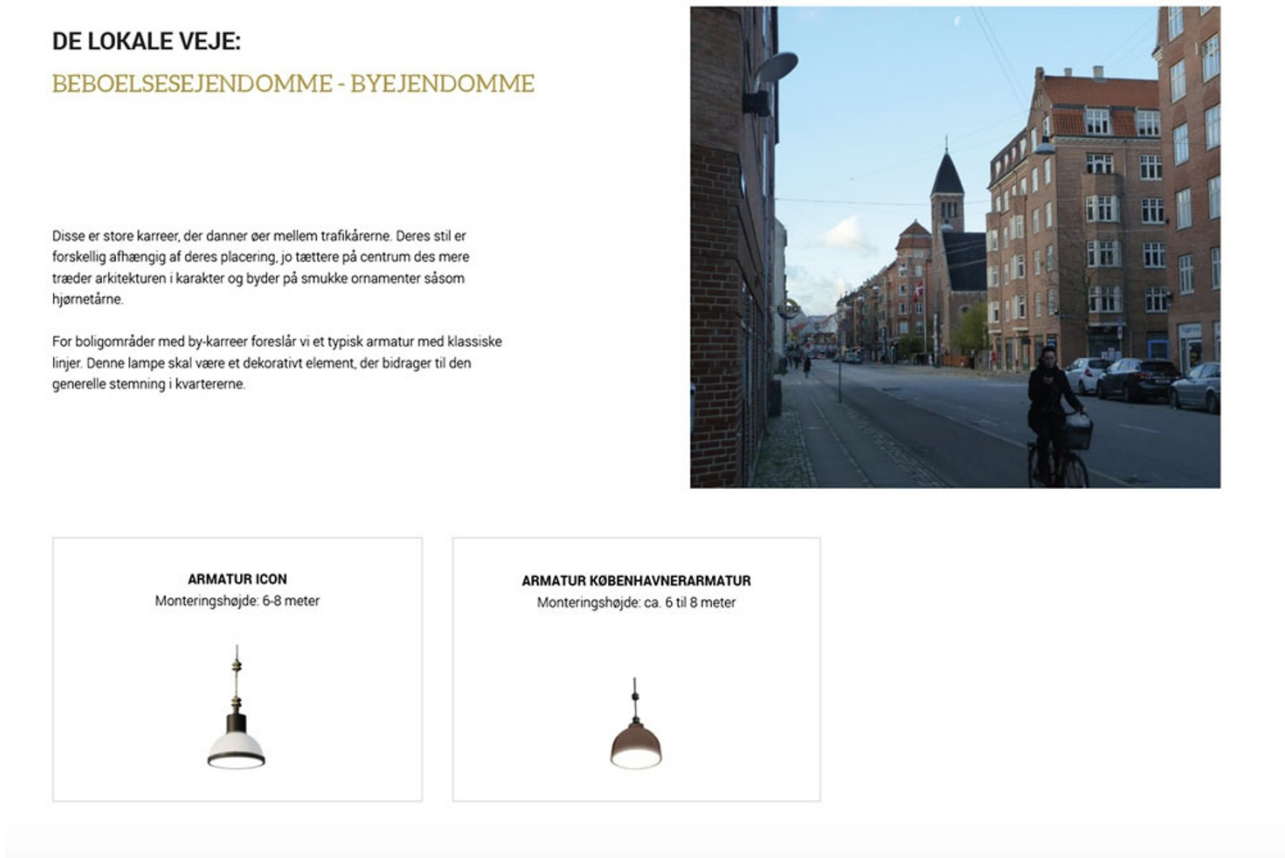

Figure 2. Street lighting prototypes. Image credit: Lighting Master Plan, Copenhagen Municipality.

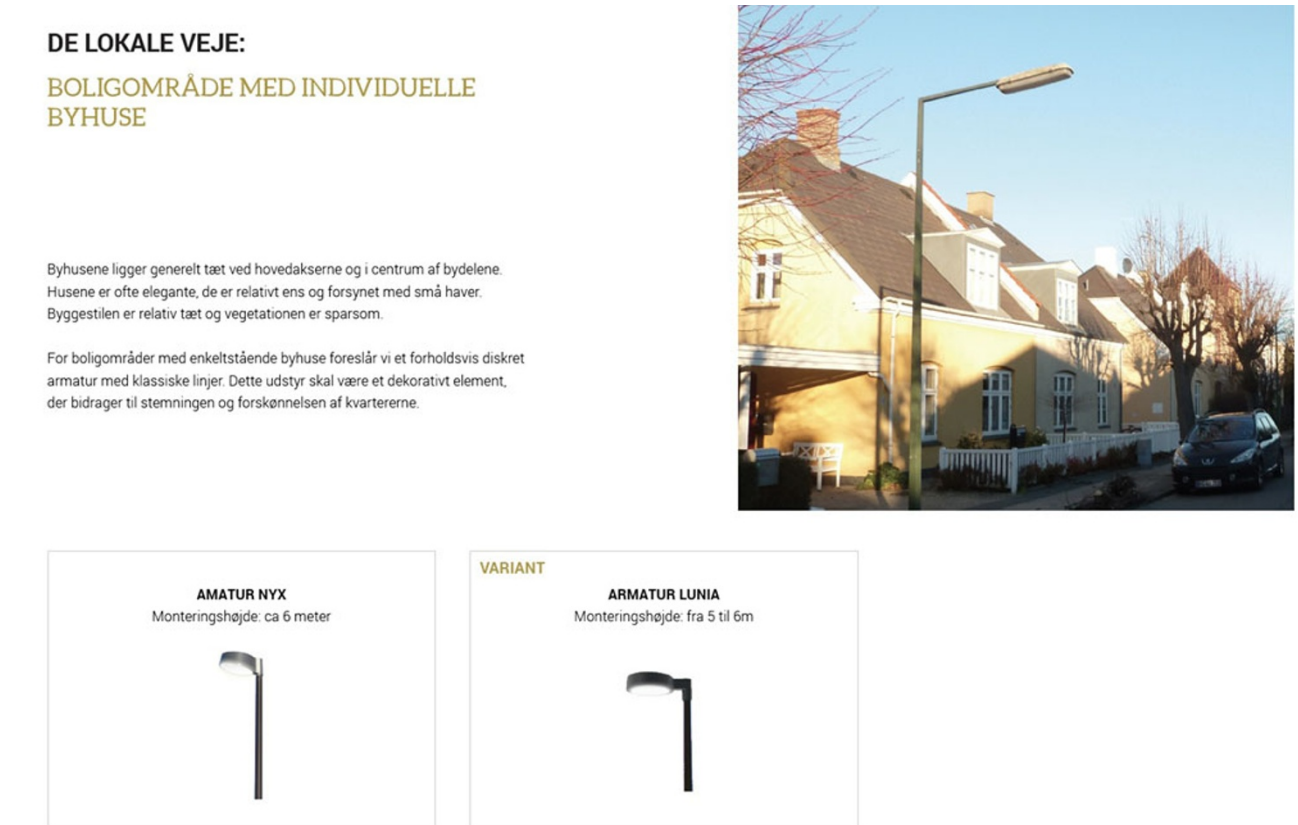

Figure 3. Street lighting prototypes. Image credit: Lighting Master Plan, Copenhagen Municipality.

Figure 4. Historic streetlamp. Image credit: Lighting Master Plan, Copenhagen Municipality.

rudimentary semiconductors, they lend themselves to digital automation. For this reason—in addition to generating light that is brighter and whiter than that of their predecessors—LEDs are both "smarter" and more dynamic: each element can be fitted with an individually manipulable sensor integrated within a cloud computing platform, which affords some variation in light intensity[4] and thus optimized energy efficiency. According to the most current published data, as of 2020 Copenhagen's conversion has reduced annual carbon emissions by 3,200 tons (compared to a baseline of 2010 figures) and achieved an annual savings of 55.5 percent of previous energy and maintenance costs (Københavns Kommune 2020). In the next section, I describe some of the apparent social costs that surfaced during the conversion.

Atmospheric Endangerment

After selecting French lighting developer CiteLum to manufacture the fixtures, Copenhagen Municipality's Technical and Environmental Administration (*Teknik og Miljøforvaltningen* or TMF) tasked a small team of architects, lighting and industrial designers, anthropologists and biologists to develop a design strategy for the conversion (Københavns Kommune 2014). During my fieldwork with the TMF, the designers and social scientists who participated in my research tended to gingerly characterize their collaboration with CiteLum as strained not only by clashing management styles (i.e. between a Danish/egalitarian and French/hierarchical division of labor), but also by what they framed as fundamentally incompatible aesthetic dispositions. Iben,[5] a lighting designer who consulted on the project, illustrated the latter contrast by pointing to what she viewed as a collective commitment among the Danish practitioners to historic preservation, one she did not perceive her French colleagues to share:

> You cannot fake historical elements in this city. When CiteLum suggested some ornamental fixture to substitute some old lamp poles at historic sites, people freaked. I saw the meetings with some of the [Danish] architects—they were falling off their stools.

Here Iben distinguishes Danish from French design sensibilities by framing the former as a cultural achievement, laminating a register of national character to specific qualities of form and orientations to time (cf. Murphy 2015, 47). In staging this contrast, Iben assumes what Pierre Bourdieu describes as the ideological vantage of a "pure gaze": "a quasi-creative power which sets the aesthete apart from the common herd by a radical difference which seems to be inscribed in 'persons'" (Bourdieu 1986 2010, 23). In this scene, the Danish architects, by way of an imputed aesthetic competence—an invisible, posited essence—are repelled by the suggestion of simulated historic design elements, which is taken as a sign of bad taste (or in Bourdieusian terms, "barbarous taste"). By contrast, the French designers, insofar as they are willing to "fake" period details, "betray" an inferior sense of refinement.

[4]Lightpoints dim according to a time schedule and road hierarchy based on capacity, as well as brighten when cyclists approach. Road typologies correspond to a hierarchy of color temperature, e.g. daylight on arterial thoroughfares; neutral white light on collector roads; and "warm white" light on residential streets.

[5]All personal names in this article are pseudonyms.

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Iben's characterization of an observable, qualitatively unequal contrast between "Danish" and "French" sensibilities suggests a semiotic ideology (Keane 2018) of taste that locates the perspective of a pure/Danish gaze within a longstanding discourse about the ontological status of "Danishness" (*danskhed*). As I noticed throughout my fieldwork, the category of Danishness is frequently invoked in both professional design discourse and everyday talk to "explain" a putatively innate quality of aesthetic refinement—specifically anchored in Danish modernism (see Mussari 2016)—via recourse to deterministic ontologies of ethnic essence (finding for instance overdetermined expression in the notion of Danish design "DNA"). Later in this essay I will return to the convergence of Danishness, design, and discourses of ethnic purity as a site of ideological work.

Misgivings about the new fixture specifications were not limited to design professionals. In the months preceding the first phase of the conversion in 2014, a series of editorials in both local and national Danish newspapers groused about the impending retirement of the iconic "Copenhagener lamp" (*Københavnerlampe*), a rust-colored, half-moon-shaped pendant designed by municipal architect Otto Kæzner in 1977 (Figure 5). Capitalizing on anticipatory nostalgia (Boym 2007) for the obsolete artifact, the Municipality sold some 7,000 Copenhagener lamps rewired for indoor use via auction website Lauritz.com during 2015, fetching prices of up to DKK 2,000 (USD 300). Other lamps subsequently changed hands via Facebook groups and secondhand shops for lower prices (on average DKK 400/USD 60). The repurposed lamps, which originally housed HPS elements, were refitted with either incandescents or LEDS, and can now be seen suspended in cafés across the city as well as in countless private residences (Figure 6). The catenary luminaires ultimately manufactured by CiteLum reference the shape of Kæzner's original design.

Tracking the afterlives of old objects is, of course, a classical anthropological project. My interest here, however, lies less with the circulation of artifacts as commodities than with their material affordances as sign vehicles. As I explain below, the reflexive uptakes of these affordances create sign relations that recur at multiple scales.

In an ethnographic study[6] that informed the lighting master plan, Copenhageners' concerns about the proposed changes to the urban built environment radiated from the fixtures themselves to an emplaced sense of historical time rooted in the recent past. Astrid, an anthropologist who worked on that study, reflected on those concerns:

> They didn't see the options of how this could be, because they hadn't seen it before. They only referred to the bad examples, like, "We don't want light pollution like they have in London."
>
> Especially in Christianshavn—that's a very special part of the city where you have this *old* feeling, and the old lamps. So they [residents] wanted to protect the history of the city, and I think they were just reluctant to see the city growing too fast, or modernizing too fast, or losing part of the original identity if we have too

[6]The study, commissioned by the Municipality, collected qualitative data from each of the city's 10 districts during the winter of 2013–2014. It was based on interviews with 300 residents about their subjective senses of place and light quality.

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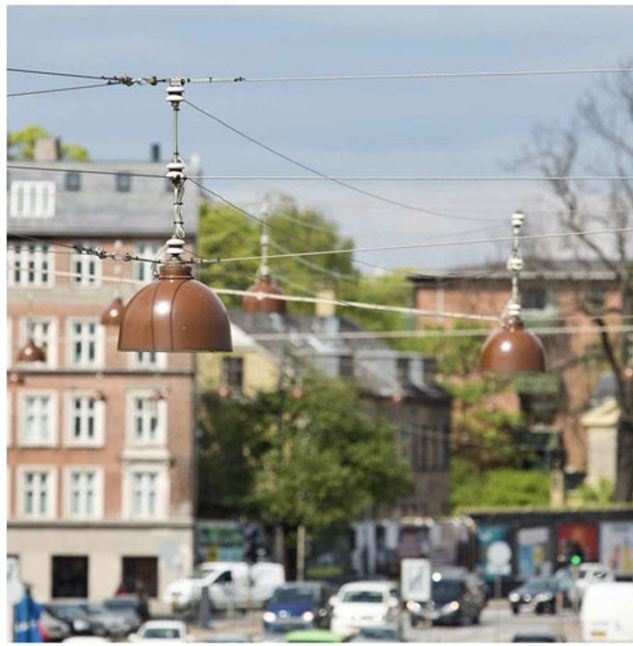

Figure 5. Otto Kæzner's "Københavnerlampe." Photo credit: Eron Johnson Antiques.

Figure 6. Otto Kæzner's rewired "Københavnerlampe" hanging in private residence. Photo by author.

> much light, and especially colors [*laughs*]. Because of the aesthetics, they were really nervous about using colors and light at that point.

Contracting the scope of comparison in Iben's category of Danishness, here the scale is local rather than national as Astrid recalls Copenhageners' apprehensions about a sense

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of civic identity at stake in changing qualities of light. In Astrid's account, both color temperature and luminous intensity index the qualie—imputed quality—of oldness, which telescopes from the city of Copenhagen to the district of Christianshavn. Both bright light and colored light are construed as "too modern" and by extension "un-Danish" (*udanske*).

In their foundational work on the semiotics of social difference (which scaffolds this analysis), Susan Gal and Judith Irvine (2019, 20) call this process of scalar iteration *fractal recursivity*, which they define as:

> that aspect of ideological work that reiterates the comparison created by the axis of differentiation, altering the sets of objects that are compared, under contrast. Ideological work expands or contracts the scope of those sets…In fractals, it is always the same distinction—the same contrast—that organizes the relations among units, at whatever degree of inclusiveness or differentiation.

In the scenes above, a semiotic ideology of taste "explains" variation among aesthetic dispositions by aligning them with essentialized cultural differences via the qualie of oldness (cf. Munn 1986). The same archaic/modern distinction differentiates Danish from un-Danish; Copenhagen from London; Medieval village from global megacity. What's more, these fractals signal multiple registers of threat at work in chronotopic imaginaries of atmospheric endangerment (cf. Choy and Zee 2015). As with period details on historic streetlamps, within the chronotope of the sodium vapor lightscape, the qualie of oldness is construed as endangered by simulation as well as modernization, perhaps both technical and social: London is here an icon of light pollution as well as cosmopolitanism. The chronotope is thus atmospheric in two registers: indexing simultaneously atmos/ethnos and in so doing, laminating localized concerns to larger perceived threats.

The qualie of oldness iconized in sepia tones and historic fixtures signals not only signs of ideologized difference but also a late industrial spacetime and the social and economic orders it powered. Within the chronotope of the LED lightscape, I suggest, we can understand new qualities of light as atmospheric conditions of the Anthropocene.[7]In the next section, I look at some of the ways in which those conditions are being managed in material practices of dwelling.

Permanent Daylight

With the advent of LEDs as ambient infrastructures (Larkin 2016), we have perhaps entered what Gaston Bachelard would proclaim a new era of "administered light" (Bachelard 1939 2012; cf. Schivelbusch 1987). For many of my interlocutors in Copenhagen, this new era dawned unremarkably or even imperceptibly. At the neighborhood association meetings I attended for my research, I encountered a fairly even mix of approval and ambivalence, as well as some outright unawareness. But for some Copenhageners—particularly those who live in first and second

[7]I use the term "Anthropocene" as a shorthand advisedly, wary of its universalizing frame which flattens culpability for and vulnerability to environmental violence (see Davis and Todd 2017).

https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.10030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 7. Matilde's apartment building façade. Photo by author.

floor apartments—energy-efficient electrification has generated new strategies and tactics of atmospheric attunement. Consider Matilde, a White Danish woman in her late 40s who lives with her two young sons in a two-bedroom apartment in the Nørrebro district. The apartment sits on the second floor of a 19th-century building on a quiet one-way street. The living room and Matilde's bedroom face the street, while her children's bedroom and kitchen face the building's courtyard. She has lived in the flat for ten years, and for the first six framed her street-facing windows with sheer, decorative curtains that gently filtered natural light throughout the space. She prefers to wake up with the morning light, she told me, as she finds it energizing.

https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.10030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 8. Matilde's bedroom. Photo by author.

Figure 9. Matilde's living room. Photo by author.

Light window treatments—or none at all—are common practice in Denmark, whose subarctic latitude allows for barely seven hours of often overcast daylight at winter solstice. This dearth of daylight from autumn through early spring is compounded by roughly 180 days of precipitation annually (that is, about half the year), which means that Danes tend to spend a significant amount of time indoors and especially at home. My interlocutors often cited the dreary Danish climate as an ideal precondition for staging cozy indoor atmospheres. While I want to hold aside the environmental determinism that informs such claims, I want to hang on to one of its central insights: that atmospheric qualities construed as melancholic are imputed to actualize a heightened sense of coziness (cf. Kristeva 1982).

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When LEDs arrived on Matilde's street in the fall of 2014, she replaced her sheer curtains with blackout shades and heavy drapes not to block the late evening summer sunshine but rather to blunt the blinding orb that had suddenly appeared outside her bedroom window (Figures 7 and 8). "It's like daylight *all the time*," she told me, "and I can't sleep with that. You need to be able to sleep!" Lateral glare from the new streetlamp—"light trespass"—also seeps into Matilde's living room, which has disturbed what she called the "cozy mood" (*den hyggelige stemning*) of the space in the evening (Figure 9). Framed in the windowpane of an otherwise warmly lit nook, the orb is flanked by homey touches like potted plants, shelves lined with books, and a fuzzy blanket draped over an easy chair. A tiny lamp placed on the bookshelf is eclipsed. "If you were sitting on the sofa near the window," she said, "it would be like, *Whoa, I need to move over*. Now we use the blackout shade at night."

Households with dogs were especially irked by the arrival of permanent daylight in Copenhagen. Coping strategies ranged from adaptive to avoidant. One man told me that he had started wearing sunglasses when he took his Yorkie out for the last walk of the night at Blågårds Plads, an aggressively illuminated park near his Nørrebro flat. Concerned for his pet's welfare, he joked that he contemplated getting the pup his own pair of shades.

After a string of LED lampposts sprang up around a park behind her home in Nordvest, a self-described "dog mom" (*hundemor*) of two dachshunds reported rerouting their evening walks to avoid them. She would rather walk an extra distance to a street whose lamps hadn't yet been converted. That route wasn't as cozy as the park used to be, she conceded, but it was worth it to her to avoid the "sharp light" (*skarpt lys*) of the new lamps, which she claimed, "just illuminate potential dangers."

Ontologies of Coziness

What "potential dangers" might an anthropology of atmosphere render visible, and how is *hygge* at stake in the cultural politics of disappearing night? To get at these questions, we need to take a closer look at the concept of *hygge* in etymological and ontological relief. Etymologically, the word descends from Old Norse and first appears in Norwegian to denote "comfort" and "well-being." As Jeppe Trolle Linnet notes, other references include notions of "safe habitat; and joyful experience, especially in one's home and with family; and a caring orientation, especially towards animals and children" (Linnett 2011, 22). *Hygge* is closely related to Scandinavian concepts such as *kos* (Norwegian) and *mysighet* (Swedish), as well as loosely analogous to West Germanic words such as *gemächlichkeit* (German) and *gezelligheid* (Dutch). Despite the family resemblance, *hygge* tends to be regarded within Denmark as nongeneralizable as a pan-Scandinavian emic concept.[8] What makes the Danish variant distinctive, scholars have noted, is its strong association with aesthetics and with qualities of light in particular.

[8] As the first reviewer of this essay astutely pointed out, the question of how Danes come to this conclusion is worth exploring.

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Because the concept of *hygge* captures a range of sensory associations and ontological properties (such as among others warmth, comfort, snugness, informality, conviviality, and authenticity), it has proven tricky to characterize. To that end an emergent ethnographic literature has offered some initial contributions (see Friedman Hansen 1976, 1980; Gullestad 1989; Bille 2015, 2019). To these treatments I'd like to add that *hygge* is perhaps best understood as an affective atmosphere (Anderson 2009; cf. Masco 2014), to borrow Ben Anderson's felicitous phrase: a multimodal structure of feeling that participates in wide-ranging processes of social indexicality.

The association of *hygge* with a sentimental attachment to domestic creature comforts has been critiqued within Danish literature and more recently Danish media as a contemptible form of bourgeois complacency, particularly when deemed excessive. An amusing illustration of this critique that satirizes a link between *hygge* and qualities of light features in Danish author Jeppe Aakjær's (1916) poem *Historiens Sang*, in which the author compares the Danish nation to a dozing infant enjoying a cozy glow as the world burns around its crib (presumably an allusion to Denmark's neutrality during the First World War) (Aakjær [1916] 1918, 161).

According to the Danish Lung Association, the average Dane burns 3.5 kg of candles per year—collectively more than any other national population. Notwithstanding the environmental and health hazards of particle pollution, a link between candlelight and well-being is enshrined in the Danish language. For example, the term "*lyseslukker*"—light snuffer—idiomatically translates as "killjoy."

As a core element of staging the cozy ambience, cozy light (*hyggelys*) has distinct aesthetic conventions. Above all it is warm, dim, and "alive."[9] In the context of social gatherings, cozy light should bathe a space in warm tones, ideally via candlelight, but not entirely illuminate it. Anja Melby Jørgensen notes that in such contexts, partial illumination may function as a social distancing technique: "… people can manage their distance to each other by 'hiding' in the shadows and, by directing their gaze toward the flames, can avoid direct eye contact that may feel too intense" (Jørgensen 1996, 43). The gentle, partial glow of cozy light erects ambient shelters within and around a cluster of familiars, circumscribing boundaries of belonging therein.

My interlocutors often stated that they experience blue-spectrum color temperatures as uncozy (*uhyggelig*). The European Union's progressive phase-out of incandescent lightbulbs, which took effect in September 2012, legislated that sensitivity into tension with the climate policy of the common market. Just after the lightbulb ban was announced in the spring of 2008, Danish retailers rapidly depleted stock in incandescents and struggled to replenish their wares in the months and years ahead. In the years that followed, a minor moral panic played out in a heated debate[10] well- documented in Danish media about the social costs of technological innovation, and by extension, collective commitments to a green transition (cf. Bille 2015).

The Danish resistance to the EU incandescent ban and attendant phenomenon of lightbulb hoarding index *hygge*'s nostalgic temporality. Judith Friedman Hansen observes that as an ontological form, *hygge* is "essentially conservative. It thrives among

[9]"Candlelight" translates from Danish as "living light" (*levende lys*).

[10]Notably, the phrase "light bulb socialism" emerged during this debate.

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the unchanging stability of old furniture and old habits" (Friedman Hansen 1976, 54). I'd like to expand this insight by proposing that *hygge*, as a category enlisted in an aesthetic regime of value, materializes a temporal orientation to pastness not only among intimate object worlds and sepia lightscapes—that is, among things and atmospheres—but also in relation to people taken to embody the nostalgic qualia of which *hygge* is indexical, e.g. comfort, warmth, familiarity. My research, however, also pointed toward the inverse proposition: that by extension, *uhygge* (uncoziness/creepiness) can signal social identities coded as "unfamiliar" and therefore potentially threatening. In the rest of this essay, I zoom into Nørrebro to examine some registers of *uhygge* and the forms of social positioning that render them legible. As we shall see, in Nørrebro, changing atmospherics are taken as signs of changing demographics.

Not So Cozy

The phrase *ikke så hyggeligt*—not so cozy—was among the most common expressions I encountered as I followed the social life of LED conversion in Copenhagen. It was typically invoked to describe an atmosphere perceived as cold and uninviting, like Matilde's living room or a public park at night. It was also invoked, I found, to refer to people perceived as unable or unwilling to enact or "properly" appreciate the cozy aesthetic, which was alternately construed as endangered by LEDs or imperiled by their absence in specific contexts (a seeming paradox to which I will return). Consider Caroline, a lighting designer who consulted on the Municipality's lighting master plan. In one of our conversations about her work, Caroline posited an axis of differentiation between warm and cool color temperatures and "Danish"/"un-Danish" sensibilities, respectively:

> Maybe you've seen the streets at Nørrebro? Where there's a lot of Danes with other ethnic backgrounds—Middle Eastern, Arabic—and there is one street in particular where there is a barber shop and some kebab restaurants, and all of them have blue light. All of them have blue light inside! Not so cozy, that light.

The barber shop to which Caroline refers is called Golden Touch, a small business owned by a family of Iraqi Danes. It sits on a busy commercial stretch of Nørrebrogade, the district's main drag, flanked by a kiosk, a couple of kebab shops, and an upscale burger joint. As evidenced in the photograph below (Figure 10), the contrast in color temperature Caroline identifies is heightened by the juxtaposition of Golden Touch, the kiosk, and kebab shops with the apartment windows above them, several of which are illuminated by warm-toned lighting.

By attributing qualities of light to qualities of persons, Caroline extends the semantic domain of *hygge* across an axis of contrast between putatively Danish and un-Danish tastes, and in Bourdieusien terms, "pure" and "barbarous" tastes (Bourdieu 1986 2010). Like the French lighting designers discussed earlier, whose suggestion of simulated historical elements was taken as a sign of bad taste among the Danish architects, the small business proprietors identified here as Middle Eastern and Arab Danes nevertheless "betray" an "un-Danish" sensibility marked by the use of "uncozy" blue-spectrum lighting in their storefronts. In each case, qualia of form and light temperature, respectively, are understood to iconically exhibit the underlying social qualities of "Danishness" and "un-Danishness" (Gal and Irvine 2019, 39); here recursively projected as the same axis of contrast—native/other—organizing the fractal

https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.10030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 10. Golden Touch barber shop, 2019. Photo by Mante Vertelyte.

categories of archaic/modern, warm/blue and *hygge*/*uhygge*. While both Iben and Caroline's accounts stage these contrasts in the register of ethnicity, I found that other uptakes of the Danish/un-Danish distinction were more overtly racially coded and inflected with a sense of danger.

Over the past several decades, Nørrebro has become a locus of xenophobic and specifically Islamophobic sentiment in Danish political discourse, sentiments which were inflamed during what has come to be known the European migrant crisis of 2015 (cf. Fox 2024). As it happened, the crisis coincided with Copenhagen's brightening lightscapes; a coincidence that makes Nørrebro an instructive site for examining the intersection of aesthetic normativities with racially charged discourse. To get at the sign relations that mediate both, let me place them within a larger historical context.

"Parallel Societies"

Nørrebro is regionally as well as nationally distinctive for its socioeconomic, religious, and ethnic diversity. While the neighborhood has historically been a working-class district home to ethnic Danes, its makeup has gradually changed over the past several decades as the construction of new social housing in the 1970s allowed broader swaths of society to move into the area, including university students and immigrant families. Today just over 27 percent of Nørrebroers are considered "new Danes" (*nye danskere*) (Københavns Kommune Statbank 2025), a term applied to immigrants as well as Danish-born descendants of immigrant parents in Danish political discourse (Danmarks Statistik 2025a). In municipal census data, 16.8 percent of Nørrebroers are identified as "non-Western immigrants" (*ikke vestlige invandrere*), an official statistical category (Københavns Kommune Statbank 2025).

Nationally, Denmark has experienced significant demographic shifts since 1967, when a guest worker policy enacted that year recruited labor migrants from Turkey, Pakistan, and what was then Yugoslavia to support an expanding manufacturing

https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.10030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

economy. Subsequent migration waves in the 1970s included family reunifications for existing guest workers and an increasing number of refugees, primarily from Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Chile, Bosnia, and Somalia. By the late 1980s, the number of non-ethnic Danes residing in Denmark had multiplied from an estimated 20,000 in 1973 to some 215,000 (Danmarks Statistik 2025b), reshaping a majority-White Scandinavian welfare state into a more multiethnic and multiracial one.[11] Yet it seems for many Danes, up to and including the erstwhile Queen, Danish welfare society has not in the process become *multicultural*, a view Margrethe II expressed to *Der Spiegel* in 2016 (Ertel and Sandberg 30 Sept. 2016).

Following the post–Cold War geopolitical realignments of the early 1990s, racialized anxieties about the integration of "new Danes" and the question of Danishness coalesced in Denmark around the social persona of the "non-Western immigrant," and specifically around Danish Muslim communities. In step with broader Scandinavian shifts rightward and the rise of the right-wing nativist Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*/DF) in Denmark, successive Danish governments since 1989 have pursued welfare chauvinist policies that marginalize migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers and their descendants. These groups are frequently characterized in the integration debate as drains on the welfare state and threats to "social cohesion" (*social sammenhæng*), despite an economic imperative for higher participation in the Danish labor force and a declining national birth rate. Emerging from this context, a nexus of liberal political ideals—e.g. egalitarianism, secularism, free expression—has in recent years gained currency in Danish political discourse as constitutive of Danishness itself.

A fundamental antagonism between cultural values staged as Western/democratic and non-Western/undemocratic is a key axis of contrast in the ontological project of Danishness. By the late 1990s, this contrast had come to be personified in the racial stereotype of the "parallel society" (*parallelsamfund*),[12] a term leveled at mostly Muslim immigrant communities to mark a perceived rejection of Danish social norms and customs. In a circular logic, the problem of the parallel society is then "explained" in the integration debate through what Ferruh Yilmaz describes as "the production of Muslim immigrants as a distinct ontology" (Yilmaz 2016, 5).

The infamous Muhammad cartoon crisis of 2005[13] is widely cited as an inflection point in anti-Muslim nativist sentiment in Denmark (see Hervik 2018). As Heiko

[11]Denmark's national population was 5,129,778 in 1989 (Danmarks Statistik 2025b).

[12]Coined by German sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer in 1996, the phrase "parallel society" (*parallelsamfund*) entered the Danish lexicon in the late 1990s and has suffused the integration debate in Denmark ever since. The phrase has also been taken up elsewhere in Europe—particularly in the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden—as a racially charged floating signifier.

[13]In September 2005, Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published a now notorious series of 12 cartoons, solicited by the editors, entitled "Muhammad's Face" (*Muhammads Ansigt*). The cartoons caricature the Prophet Muhammad by drawing on the racist stereotype of the "violent Muslim terrorist." For example, one depicts a bearded figure wearing a turban rendered as a bomb with a lit fuse. Editor Flemming Rose framed the series as a protest against a perceived Islamic imposition of "self-censorship" in Denmark, as well as a broader critique of an ongoing debate about the supposed incompatibility of Islam with "modern, secular Western societies" of which Denmark is supposedly exemplary. While many in the Danish Muslim community expressed outrage over what they argued was a deliberate provocation—depiction of the prophet is canonically considered blasphemous—many more ethnic Danes were in turn aggrieved by their outrage, a dynamic that would come to define the incident. Hostilities quickly escalated, prompting violent protests at Danish embassies in Beirut and Damascus.

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Henkel argues, the cartoon controversy forged new tacit alliances between the Danish far right and social democratic center (Henkel 2010, 69). It also allowed Danes to reimagine themselves as European in new ways, aligning the Danish variant of secularism with similar Swedish and German currents against pious Muslim communities positioned as defying "Western" cultural values. In this performance of Danishness *as Europeanness*, Henkel suggests, a new emphasis on secularity has become a central feature of Danish political life (cf. Agrama 2012).[14]

More recently, proponents of Danish nationalism-as-secularism have seized upon the specter of the "non-Western asylum seeker" as an avatar for anti-Muslim grievance. Over five weeks during September–October 2015, some 28,800 asylum seekers entered Denmark, many of whom were fleeing the escalating civil war in Syria (Moestrup 12 Oct. 2015). Others fled violence and persecution in other Muslim-majority countries in regions south and east of Europe, primarily Afghanistan and Iraq. As arrivals peaked that September, photographs in Danish newspapers captured chaotic scenes of hundreds of asylum seekers walking along Danish motorways. Many were en route to Sweden, which ultimately accepted more refugees per capita (ca. 163,000) than any other European country in 2015 (Migrationsverket 2025). On September 9, hundreds of Sweden-bound refugees traveling by train refused to leave their cars as they were stopped at the German border by Danish police. The Danish government responded by suspending all state-owned rail service to and from Germany for twenty-four hours. Approximately 300 migrants continued their journeys by foot along the E45 motorway,[15] evidently determined to avoid being registered in Denmark, where their asylum was not assured (BBC 9 Sept. 2015).

That trepidation was well founded. In the weeks preceding these events, the newly elected conservative Danish government had passed a raft of measures designed to deter asylum-based immigration. Such measures include, to name just a few: slashing by up to 50 percent an integration benefit package for new refugees; extending the waiting period for family reunification from one to three years for those with temporary protection status; and tightening conditions for permanent residency to include Danish language proficiency. On September 7, the national government published a series of advertisements in four Lebanese newspapers outlining the new deterrent policies. A now notorious "jewelry law" authorizing the seizure of refugees' cash and valuables exceeding DKK 10,000 (USD 1,565) followed in January 2016.[16]

In December 2016, the Danish government indefinitely suspended a program to receive 500 refugees annually through the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), characterizing the policy change as an "emergency brake" necessary to curb Denmark's intake of asylum seekers (Hofverberg 2016). In its 2016 annual report to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration described the new policies as efforts to filter out those with low "integration potential" and remedy the existence of "parallel societies" living

[14]For example, in 2018 the Danish conservative government passed a national so-called "burqa ban" even though fewer than 0.1 percent of Muslim women in Denmark wear full-face veils.

[15]The E45 motorway connects Norway with Italy via Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany and Austria. Is the longest north-south European route.

[16]Tellingly, Ukrainian refugees were exempted from the jewelry law as they began seeking asylum in Denmark following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.10030 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in "vicious circles of bad image, social problems and a high rate of unemployment" (Udlændinge og Integrationsministeriet 2016, 63).

In a country committed to a green transition but more ambivalent about a demographic one, the inexorability of climate displacement is likely to inflame nativist sentiment. In 2024, climate disasters caused 45.8 million displacements worldwide, the highest annual figure on record (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2025.). Today, over two billion people live in high climate risk "red zone" areas, almost all of which are low- and middle-income countries with limited capacity to recover from extreme weather events (Columbia Climate School 2025). Most vulnerable among these are low-lying megadeltas, small island states, and the Sahel belt; that is, places with predominantly non-White populations. As the Danish case suggests, it is not hard to imagine a scenario in which climate resilience means fortifying built environments as well as national borders.

As of 2024, the category of "non-Western immigrant" corresponded to 10 percent of the Danish national population (Udlændinge og Integrationsministeriet 2024, 28). Approximately 30 percent of all immigrants and descendants are concentrated in Copenhagen and Aarhus, Denmark's two largest cities. In the wake of the 2015 migrant crisis in Copenhagen, I observed that an increasingly xenophobic discourse appeared to be merging with an aesthetic one.

So far in this essay I have examined ascribed associations of blue and bright artificial light, glossed as uncozy (*uhyggelig*), with purportedly "un-Danish" tastes. However, in my fieldwork I noticed what appeared to be a puzzling incoherence in those constructed resemblances: that darkness could likewise be taken as a sign of uncoziness linked to un-Danishness. For example, several of my interlocutors singled out as uncozy a particular stretch of Griffenfeldsgade (Figure 11), a Nørrebro side street populated by several Ethiopian, Eritrean, Lebanese, and Indian restaurants, as well as a Somali bridal boutique and an African barber shop. One thirtysomething White Danish woman told me that before the lighting conversion, the street was so dark that it looked "like Africa." With an eye to the ethnographic puzzle it poses, I will now consider the racialization of darkness at work in this characterization.

Light Snuffers

During the tail end of my fieldwork in Copenhagen from 2015 to 2018, a series of blackouts darkened stretches of the city. Because they were triggered by localized interference with the new streetlamps rather than systemic failure, the blackouts affected discrete sections of individual neighborhoods—Nørrebro for the most part as well as Amagerbro—rather than the city as a whole. As a resident of Nørrebro at the time, I got stuck several times biking around in the dark.

On a Friday night in September 2018, I was headed home along a darkened stretch of Guldbergsgade when I noticed flashes of blue flickering ahead. Recognizing them as emergency vehicle lights, I slowed to a stop and joined a small group of onlookers. Apart from the blue flashes, darkness blanketed the length of the corridor and its side streets. I asked a middle-aged White woman what was going on. She replied in Danish that there had been a shooting on Meinungsgade not long after the light cut out. "Of course it can be super cozy to suddenly be able to see the stars in the sky," she added,

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Figure 11. Griffenfeldsgade (post-LED conversion), 2019. Photo by author.

"but now that this area has become a war zone, I'm biking home with my heart in my throat." I later learned through local news media that three men had been shot during the incident but not critically wounded. A blackout had preceded the shooting by about an hour. Around 8 pm, streetlamps along six residential side streets cut out; 8–10 shots were then fired on one of them shortly after 9 pm.

Several of the blackouts that occurred in Nørrebro during my residence there coincided with episodes of gun violence that intensified across the neighborhood in 2017 and 2018.[17] Danish news media framed these incidents as escalations of a turf war between rival gangs comprised of teenagers and young adults with "non-Western ethnic backgrounds." While a police investigation failed to establish a material link between the blackouts and gun violence, some of my interlocutors in the neighborhood nevertheless imputed a causal relationship to their proximity. Consider Jan, a White Danish man in his 60s and former high school teacher who now works as a home health aide. I met Jan in the spring of 2018 at a community meeting held at a church in Nordvest, a district bordering the western edge of Nørrebro. As part of a "Safe Station" campaign, a local civic organization affiliated with the Municipality had convened the meeting to discuss lighting conditions in and around Nørrebro Station, an aboveground commuter rail hub. During the discussion, an apparent consensus emerged that lighting conditions at the station were dark (*mørk*), unsafe (*utryg*) and uncozy (*uhyggelig*), especially at the overpass. I happened to sit next to Jan as the organizers wrangled the 50-some participants into breakout groups. I asked him what he thought about the lighting conditions in the neighborhood:

> Jan: It's terrible. I feel very unsafe, and the reason for that is that the Muslims keep the areas around their mosques and schools dark at night.

[17] While accounts for 2018 vary, between June and November 2017 alone the conflict in Nørrebro involved 42 shootings and four knifings. Twenty-five persons were shot and four were killed (Politiken 2020).

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Author: Why is that?

Jan: So the young gang members can run around causing trouble and shooting at each other.

Author: Do you think that brighter lighting in those areas would make you feel safer?

Jan: No, because they will keep at it anyway. On Tagensvej someone is shot or knifed every week.[18] Did you know that Muhammad is now the most common name for children born in Denmark?[19] You see the priest over there? She is married to a Muslim. And the woman in hijab sitting at the entrance, signing folks in? In ten years' time this church will be a mosque.

While Jan's Islamophobic comments are obviously incendiary—and perhaps evince a sense of comfort to speak candidly with me, an American White woman—they caricature a more judiciously phrased racialist discourse cohering in Copenhagen around luminosity and ethnicity. Consider Rasmus, a CiteLum electrician who repaired damaged infrastructure following the Nørrebro and Amagerbro blackouts. When I spoke with him in August 2019, Rasmus, a fortysomething White Danish man, described various kinds of lighting vandalism occurring in Nørrebro, including smashed lamps, severed wires, and luminaires spray-painted black. "The light-snuffers (*lyseslukkere*) are quite good at it," he quipped, and speculated that they likely had access to electrical expertise. Rasmus characterized the actors involved as male teenagers of non-ethnic Danish descent:

I've only seen men. These are young people, teenagers. Ethnic background was a mix; mostly Black, but most of them were not Danish people. Not to be racist, but it was not the Danish people. Not the second generation anymore, maybe the fourth generation.

Regarding possible motives for the Nørrebro blackouts, Rasmus emphasized that while a correlation to incidents of gun violence following shortly thereafter was likely, causation was impossible to determine because the automated lighting management system logs status hourly, making the exact timing of power failure impossible to pinpoint. At local park Nørrebroparken, where lamppost luminaires were repeatedly spray-painted black, Rasmus linked the vandalism to an illicit marijuana market situated there in which it seemed dealers preferred to transact in the dark. He said that the dealers would often taunt the technicians as they made repairs. "They actually laugh and say, 'That's fine. You fix it; we damage it again.'"

At blackout sites in Nørrebro, CiteLum technicians worked during daylight hours due to safety concerns (a departure from protocol, which is to dispatch immediately after an outage). Following an incident during a series of blackouts at Mjølnerparken, a social housing complex near Nørrebro Station, in which a bike lock chain was

[18]While to my knowledge two incidents occurred on Tagensvej in 2018, Jan's claim is a gross exaggeration.

[19]The most common name for boys born in Denmark in 2018 was in fact William; for girls it was Ida (Danmarks Statistik 2025c).

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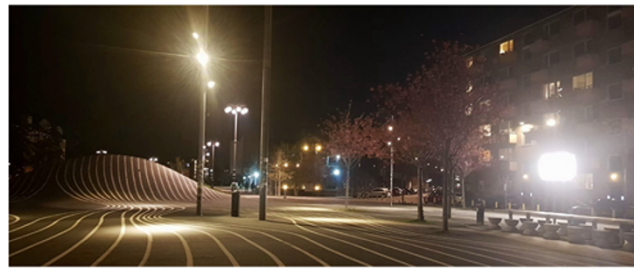

Figure 12. Den Sorte Plads, Superkilen, 2021. Photo by Mante Vertelyte.

used to smash the windshield of a CiteLum van, technicians began to adjust their work schedules. "We don't want any people to be hurt when they come to work," Rasmus explained. "[Mjølnerparken] is one of the ghettos,[20] so we don't take the chance." Rasmus attributed the blackouts at the complex to young male residents allegedly involved with other incidents across the neighborhood. Worth noting is Mjølnerparken's location along the northwestern edge of Superkilen,[21] a highly programmed public space populated by among other design objects a series of stylized LED streetlamps, a light sculpture and several neon signs (Figures 12 and 13). As a resident of an apartment overlooking the area at the time, I can personally attest to the excessive radiance of these light sources. I wondered if the actors responsible for the blackouts at Mjølnerparken, which included lighting elements at Superkilen, may have been local residents who simply wished to sleep in peace.

Whether the intermittent blackouts in Nørrebro were causally linked to gun violence, an informal cannabis trade and/or insomnia remains unknown. What is clear, however, in talk about them and about changing qualities of artificial light more broadly is the lamination of a racialized and specifically Islamophobic discourse onto

[20]In 2018, Mjølnerparken became the public face of the Danish conservative government's so-called "Ghetto Plan" (*Ét Danmark Uden Parallelsamfund: Ingen Ghettoer i 2030*), a sweeping policy directive that designates as "ghettos" 27 residential zones across Denmark based on criteria such as a 50 percent "non-Western" population, educational attainment, employment rate, and crime rate (Regeringen 2018). The plan consists of 22 initiatives to "integrate the ghettos," including among others double punishment for certain crimes within certain borders; conditions on social welfare benefits; mandatory Danish-language daycare for young children; and the demolition or redevelopment and privatization of social housing. Since the policy's implementation in 2018, thousands of people have been displaced from their homes via private sales, demolitions, and forced evictions (Hedlund 2024). In February 2025, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) issued a non-binding legal opinion that the category of "non-Western background" constitutes ethnic origin, and the legislation therefore discriminates against residents on the basis of race.

[21]Superkilen is a multiuse public space commissioned by Copenhagen Municipality that opened in 2012. It was designed via a collaboration between the architecture firm BIG (Bjarke Ingels Group), art collective Superflex, and landscape architecture firm Topotek 1. According to creators Nanna Gyldholm Møller, an architect, and artist Rasmus Nielsen, Superkilen thematizes Nørrebro's diversity as a "resource" rather than a "problem" via 108 design objects curated from around the world, such as a swing set from Baghdad and bollards from Accra. All objects were either imported from their countries of origin or reproduced as exact replicas. A bike path snakes along the length of three color-blocked zones, bisecting a sort of obstacle course in theme park multiculturalism.

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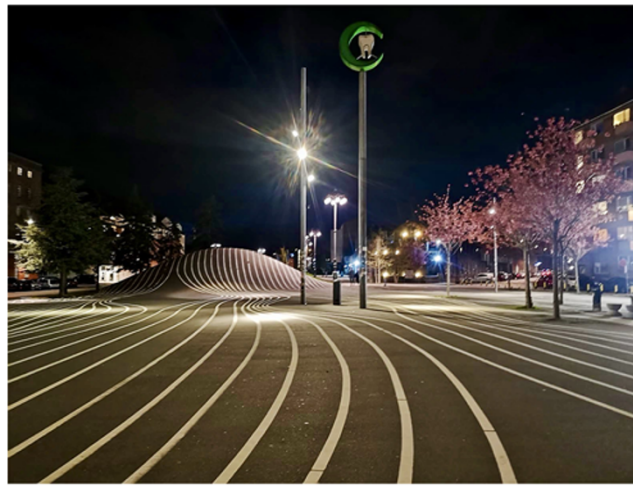

Figure 13. Den Sorte Plads, Superkilen, 2021. Photo by Mante Vertelyte.

an aesthetic one. I want to now zoom in on the registers of social positioning through which this lamination is semiotically achieved (Gal 2017).

Despite growing up in Denmark, speaking fluent Danish and presumably holding Danish citizenship, the young people allegedly involved with streetlamp vandalism in Nørrebro are in Rasmus' view "not Danish." That their families may have been living in Denmark for several generations is immaterial; for Rasmus, non-ethnic Danes will never be Danish. This conjecture on the ontological status of Danishness crystallizes what in recent years has become a mainstream current in Danish political discourse: the racialization of "non-Western" (i.e. non-White) ethnicities as un-Danish. As we have seen, in the context of changing lightscapes, the aesthetic category of *hygge* is implicated in this regime of value.

One aspect of the semiotic process involved is rhematization, which entails a slippage from indexical to iconic sign relations in which "a contrast of indexes is interpreted as a contrast in depictions" (Gal and Irvine 2019, 19). In the discourse about light intensity and color temperature considered here, the social persona of the "non-Western immigrant" becomes iconized as "uncozy" via a process of rhematization in which quailic congruences are construed between qualities of light and qualities of persons (cf. Calder 2019). Recall Jan's tirade about "Muslim gang members" who, according to him, deliberately darken areas around their places of worship and schooling in order to wage a turf war with impunity. For Jan, the architectural embodiment of Islam shrouded in darkness signals not only violence, but also a pious encroachment on ostensibly secular humanist Danish values: *In ten years' time this church*[22] *will be a mosque*. Less provocatively, in Rasmus' account of Mjølnerparken, the "ghetto" is

[22]Danish churches in Copenhagen largely function as secular community centers rather than places of worship.

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dark and scary and home to dark people—that is, non-White—and in this ontology therefore un-Danish (cf. Garner 2014).

By now I have belabored the point that the category of *uhygge* is conventionally associated with cool-toned, bright lighting, and that these tones and intensities are taken to index the "un-Danishness" of the "non-Western immigrant" persona. Recall Astrid's account of Copenhageners' apprehensions about having colored and/or "too much" light in Christianshavn, which might signal that the city was growing or modernizing "too fast" like London, here an icon of light pollution as well as multiculturalism. Likewise, in Caroline's description of small businesses owned by Danes of Middle Eastern descent, the storefronts she cites are all lit with "uncozy" blue light. Here we can see a process of fractal recursivity at work: the distinction between ethnic-Dane/non-Western immigrant is reenacted at a narrower scale, telescoping from the nation to the city to individual businesses within a racialized neighborhood.

Yet as we have learned, *uhygge* can also manifest as a fear of darkness. From the fluorescent lighting of a barber shop to the pitch blackness of a Nørrebro side street, polarities of luminous intensity—brightness and darkness—are each taken as signs of the "uncoziness" of non-ethnic Danes in different contexts, iconizing a quality of menace that appears to inhere in the people themselves. What should we make of this seeming paradox?

The semiotic work of enregisterment shows us that this is not actually paradoxical. My aim in this brief ethnographic account of *hygge* has not been to pin down its fixed attributes so that we can "know it when we see it"; rather it has been to analyze the interdiscursive processes by which qualia of sensory experience are swept up in regimes of value under the sign of *hygge*. As social actors impute associations between qualities of light and qualities of persons, those constructed resemblances instantiate—enregister—certain values while ignoring or downplaying others (Gal 2017, S128). As Susan Gal explains in her semiotic analysis of histories of European porcelain, enregisterment is a productive, open-ended semiotic process in which qualia and categories can be re-evaluated, transformed, and recruited for different value projects by new interpretants (ibid, S149). Novel circumstances—say, a blackout, or an influx of asylum seekers—afford the construal of qualia—here brightness and darkness—that alter extant axes in regimes of value and thereby reconfigure the original cultural category (*uhygge*) (ibid, S132). This reconfigured category, then, by way of selective engagement with enregistered qualities, becomes available for use in other ontological projects.

One such project in which *hygge* and *uhygge* are embedded that I have hinted at throughout yet not fully explained is the racialization of Danishness as Whiteness. I would like to close this discussion, then, by locating it within a regional discourse of "White innocence."

Conclusion

Scholars of racialization in Denmark and more broadly in Northern Europe have described a dominant emic perception of the Nordic countries as uniquely egalitarian and "innocent" of the problem of racism as a pernicious form of Nordic exceptionalism that assumes the stance of mere bystander (Garner 2014; Hervik et al. 2018). Chenchen Zhang describes this discomfort with acknowledging the existence of racism

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in Denmark and its colonial history as a kind of culturalist racism based on a spatial imaginary of political ideals and religious beliefs coded as qualities of "the West" (Zhang 2020). Ideals and beliefs imagined to originate in "the Rest," then, are positioned as incompatible with and thus threatening to the "Danish way of life." In the discourse about "non-Western immigrants" in Denmark, essentializations of liberal Danish values, such as free expression and gender equality, are pitted against the ostensibly oppressive patriarchy of Muslim-majority societies in the Middle East and North Africa. As Zhang argues, this substitution of race with culture—and Orientalist assumptions about fundamentally discordant "cultures" and "values"—alibis culturalist racism with plausible deniability, strengthening the narrative of White innocence (Wekker 2016).

Taking up that narrative in a U.S. context, Setha Low explores how the category of "niceness" functions as a code for Whiteness in her ethnography of the spatial practices of gated communities in the suburbs of New York and San Antonio. As residents make moral and aesthetic judgements about their fortified surroundings, Low shows how a professed desire for "niceness" provides a rationalizing discourse for managing a fear of others imagined to threaten the normative Whiteness of the community. Via coded appeals to norms of middle-class civility, like cleanliness and orderliness—tropes of suburban landscape aesthetics—niceness masks the inscription of White privilege in the built world as well as euphemizes a fear of its erosion (Low 2009, 87). Over time, these inscriptions come to be naturalized as normal, unmarked, and beyond conscious awareness (Dyer 1997; Ahmed 2007). Niceness "becomes particularly powerful," Low writes, "when linked to 'changes' in the neighborhood that justify the reasons that a person or family decides to move to a gated community, a 'safer' and more secure environment" (Low 2009, 88). In these manicured enclaves, "nice" people with "nice" middle-class values sidestep the taboo of race as they "innocently" defend their home environments from the aesthetic intrusions of racialized others (ibid, 80; cf. Hage 1998).

The ideological work of erasure—a component of the semiotic process of differentiation—allows us to see how the narrative of White innocence depends on suppressing the taboo of race. As an "aspect of ideological work through which some phenomena … are rendered invisible" (Gal and Irvine 2019, 20), erasure creates coherence in an ideologized schema by ignoring, downplaying, or explaining away elements that cannot be reconciled with the observer's worldview (ibid, 21). In fact, all axes of differentiation entail erasure, as attention is focused on some qualities while others are minimized or overlooked. We have seen how, as Gal and Irvine explain, rhematization reduces axes of contrast to simple icons through erasure, making it seem as if conjured qualities inhere in the contrasting entities themselves (ibid, 19). This naturalizing move is necessary to make the narrative of White innocence plausible in Danish political discourse. The distinction of "The West" and "The Rest" active in this discourse is—like the Danish/un-Danish, archaic/modern, democratic/undemocratic and *hyggelig*/*uhyggelig* distinctions—yet another fractal iteration of the original native/other contrast. The geography of imagination and management (Trouillot 2002) on which these axes of difference are plotted ignores the fact that almost all the countries glossed as "non-Western" in this schema correspond to largely non-White populations. By suppressing the taboo of race and mobilizing instead the anodyne registers of "culture" and "values," Whiteness is naturalized as invisible, leaving the project of Nordic exceptionalism

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intact. Indeed, as Edouard Glissant observes, "The West is not in the West. It is a project, not a place" (Glissant 1989 1992, 2).

Animating Susan Leigh Star's oft-cited insight that infrastructure remains invisible until breakdown (Star 1999, 382), the sudden dysfunction of a municipal lighting system—from a blinding orb outside a bedroom window to a pitch-black neighborhood corridor—illuminates the semiotic process through which a fear of "light-snuffers" can be coded in more innocent terms. By trailing ambient intensities of *hygge* across Copenhagen's evolving atmospherics, I have shown how changing qualities of artificial light are swept up in ideological regimes of value. Most simply, I have examined how an urban built environment in flux is experienced as eroding culturally configured sensory comforts, and how this erosion is grafted onto a fear of the city's potentially diminishing "Danishness." This semiotic process is evidenced in the lamination of racialized anxieties about "non-Western immigrants" onto discomforts derived from energy-efficient lighting technologies, and the apparent intrusion of both into habit worlds of *hygge*.

Yet as I have argued, such discomforts are not simply aesthetic; rather they enact a semiotic ideology in which Danishness is deployed as a stand-in for Whiteness and the matrix of cultural value projects in which it is embedded. More broadly, the convergence of aesthetic regimes of value with changing qualities of light in Denmark indexes imagined threats to a White world order and the extractive social arrangements it sustains. As I have demonstrated, phenomenal qualities of *hygge* are not given but are rather themselves semiotically achieved, and in some of the cases surveyed here, recruited for nativist value projects. In Copenhagen, attending to such affective recruitments—and their loading with racialized sentiment—renders visible the fault lines of the Danish racial imagination.

Acknowledgements. Many thanks to the brain trust that shaped the development of this article, particularly colleagues and mentors at the Semiotics Workshop at the University of Chicago and the Department of Anthropology at University of Copenhagen. Hussein Ali Agrama, Mikkel Bille, Ella Butler, Michael Fisch, Susan Gal, Mallory James, Constantine Nakassis, Anjulie Rao, and Mante Vertelyte offered invaluable feedback on earlier iterations. I'd like to thank in particular Catherine Fennell, Colin Halverson, and Joseph Masco for their close readings. I'd also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their generous insights. Special thanks go to Kristina Funkeson and Mante Vertelyte for tracking down the right photograph. Finally, I am deeply grateful to my interlocutors within the Technical and Environmental Administration as well as folks in Nørrebro who let me into their lives.

Funding Statement. Research for this article was supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Division of Social Sciences at the University of Chicago, and the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago.

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Cite this article: Journey, Rebecca. 2025. "A Semiotics of Coziness and Disappearing Night." *Signs and Society* 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.10030