

Article

Epistemic Disobedience and Grief in Academia

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Abstract: Drawing on conversations with foreign women in academic positions at one major University in Norway, this article is inspired by Barad's and Haraway's theorizing on how matter and discourse are mutually constituted through a diffractive approach. Understanding diffraction as an embodied engagement, a becoming with the data through shared entanglements, this article argues that the researcher's personal background cannot be separated from the data produced. Departing from the decolonial theorist Castro-Gómez concept 'hubris of zero-point epistemology', the existence of an abstract and transcendental western universalism, where 'the observer observes without been observed' (Domínguez 2020; Mignolo 2009), assemblages of foreign female academics are explored through posthuman feminism and decolonial perspectives (Jackson and Mazzei 2012; Taguchi 2012; Puwar 2004). Through immersion in assemblages of contradictions, strength, and resistance, this article contends that policymakers' good intentions of diversity in higher education, and the existence of different bodies, are shaking the world of academia, albeit slowly. Academia is still immersed in zero-point epistemology, favoring western, upper-class, paternalist, and meritocratic thought, detached from academics' embodied knowledge. This brings into existence 'bodies out of place', re/producing grief, resistance, and epistemic disobedience when some academics are not suitable of becoming real academics.



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1. Introduction

The call of this Special Issue, 'The Promise of Education and Grief', asks us to collaborate with insights from the era of globalization and technologization. While agreeing that education has been crucial to knowledge creation, democracy, and justice, regarded as the basis for the development of both individuals and societies [1], I approach this call by immersing myself in assemblages of non-western women academics in Norwegian higher education. In this article, I argue that entanglements of western, upper class, paternalist, and meritocratic thought prevent those detached from academics' embodied knowledge from being fully accepted and recognized in higher education academia. Academics are deemed to be the intellectual elite of society [2] and should embody the UNESCO Commission for Education in the 21st century emphasizing learning to live together in a globalized world as the foundation of higher education [3]. White papers on internationalization in higher education stress solidarity, intercultural encounters, civic mindedness, and cooperation skills, all of which are vital generic 21st century skills [4]. Politically, a strong emphasis is placed on global cooperation, diversity, gender equality, and a global mindset as positive values emergent from intercultural knowledge [5]. Norwegian higher education is in addition strongly influenced by meritocratic and social democratic principles. The right to equal opportunities and free education serve as key premises preventing social dimensions like gender, class, and ethnic background from being obstacles to entering higher education [6]. However, such rights are not always extended to certain bodies when it comes to academia, such as bodies who do not conform to neoliberal, academic norms that inhabit western institutions of higher education [7]. This article explores how certain minority women academics seek to disrupt this status quo.

Due to the mentioned, I find something troubling, something colonial and western-oriented in the objectified and neutral notion of Norwegian higher education. Epistemic premises of academia involve a narrow and partial vision, where assumptions of individual merit and high-level ambitious academics of excellence are normalized, creating assemblages of 'otherness' in some scholars [8]. Partly conceived by increased gender, ethnic, and racial diversity in Norwegian academia, these taken-for-granted assumptions cause epistemological discomfort in the position of 'the unmarked and neutral observer' [8,9]. The arrival of diversity brings into relief what has been able to pass as invisible and normal, and it is from this gendered and racialized position, as an ethnic minority woman academic myself, that I write these words. Santiago Castro-Gómez [10] describes this invisible subject position through the concept of the hubris of zero-point epistemology, the existence of an abstract epistemic western universalism, where the observer observes without being observed or represented. The empirical data of this article, in the form of embodied knowledge of non-western minority faculty women, disaffirm political intentions of embracing diversity among the professoriate in universities [11]. As I will account throughout this article, academia remains bound to assemblages of western, paternalist, white, able-bodied, upper-class norms [2,12], ideals of meritocracy, and standards of scientific neutrality and objectivity [8,9], reproducing grief in Norwegian academia.

Participants in this study appear as both insiders and outsiders at the same time, working in the world of academia but not totally a part of it. This study unveils tenuous and contradictory entanglements of disembodiment, invisibility, western universalism, and resistance [13,14]. Educational grief is understood as entanglements of contradictions, through inclusive and exclusionary dynamics taking place at the same time, as being almost a part of, but not entirely, representing diversity and color in academia [15]. These contradictions are further sustained by ontological complicity [13], defined as naturalized confidence and faith on fair academic achievement through meritocracy, individual self-efforts, and hard work. As I will show, this faith unveils ignorance of how academia is locally constituted and historically sedimented, creating and reproducing an academic subject with an undisputed right to pass as a universal and neutral figure who gets a conventional right to observe others from zero-point epistemology [9]. Epistemic disobedience is understood as resistance to this unmarked subjectivity and zero-point epistemology, as other conceivable becomings in academia through increasing diversity [16]. At the same time, it is these women's strength and resistance, despite the grief, that is moving and changing the academic culture today. I will further develop this argumentation throughout the article. First, studies of academic women and non-western academic women are reviewed, following an explanation of theoretical and methodological perspectives applied in this study, before moving to empirical analysis and discussions. I will also add a personal dimension in this article, being part of the diffractive approach of this study, which is elaborated in the methodological part [17,18].

Gender and Ethnicity in Norwegian Academia

Norwegian academia is characterized by vast gender equality and ethnic diversity by faculty members. In 2018, 48% of researchers and academic staff were women and 29% had foreign background [19]. On the other side, only 31% of female academics occupy the top academic full professor position, and 80% of foreign academics were from Germany and Sweden [20]. Studies emphasizing ethnic minorities in Norwegian academia [6,21,22] show how immigrants have poorer opportunities entering higher education compared to ethnic Norwegians [23], experiencing microaggressions [24] and ethnic discrimination [25]. Maximova-Mentzoni et al. [26] highlight that it is no advantage being a foreigner in Norwegian academia, emphasizing diverse barriers ethnic minorities face in academic workplaces today.

Regarding gender equality, the Nordic countries are often described as the promised land [27]. Although self-efforts facilitate entry in Norwegian meritocratic higher educational system, studies of women in academia stress challenges combining an academic

career and family/childcare, arguing how academic ideals of excellence have different outcomes for men and women [28,29]. Studies stress how women might experience a double bind because benefits of the welfare system regarding parental leave clash with academic work culture in neoliberal economies [30], showing how men to a higher degree than women can work long hours [31], and reproducing gender blindness in academia [32]. The goal of gender balance is therefore still not fully accomplished.

Research on ethnic minority women in academia are scarce in the Nordic countries. Most studies emphasizing ethnicity and gender are conducted abroad [26]. International research on academic women of color stress expectations using their cultural and ethnic experiences to cater to students of color, bringing color and diversity to all-white academic faculties [2,11] and balancing the contradictory realities of ethnic domestic and academic norms [33]. Race and gender positions women of color outside the academic norm [13], resulting in significant obstacles, e.g., exclusion from professional networks, lack of support, and questioning of competence [34]. These studies reveal deeply embedded practices perpetuating white and male privilege in academic institutions of today [11]. In the Nordic context, Mählck argues how higher education is still gendered and racialized, reproducing color blindness as a silenced discourse in Swedish academia [27]. Kange argues how Black women academics in Denmark still exist in the margins of institutional Whiteness [35]. In Norway, however, I find no equivalent study emphasizing colored women in academia, so this study is a contribution to this field.

Female subjects in this study were given the opportunity to voice embodied experiences by articulating feelings, bodily sensations, atmospheres, and words to capture their entangled reality [14,36]. The focus is drawn upon the co-constitution of discursive materiality, emphasizing performativity and becomings in Norwegian higher education.

2. Theory

What I want to call attention to with this article is the importance of bringing to light the epistemic and ontological assumptions we operate from when thinking about Norwegian academia [8]. Contemporary higher education privileges the constitution of an academic without a body, narrating itself as objective and neutral, with no reference to gendered, racialized, nationalized, and sexualized categories [37]. Academia values scholars for producing an exemplary research portfolio; teaching competently; and, to an extent, being a good colleague [2]. Academics in higher education, regarded as highly hierarchical institutions, want to be successful in fulfilling requirements of academic excellence. Standards of excellence are mainly based on meritocracy, referring to a social system that sorts people into positions and distributes rewards solely according to individual performance or talent [28]. Academics are expected to be judged on merit alone, and dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, or class should not matter. Enlightenment thought has been able to successfully claim that all bodies are the same, leaning on the bodies of those creating this epistemology [8]. White, western masculinity thus occupies the invisible and privileged position of being unmarked by its bodily nature [13] (p. 142). However, academic meritocracy still enacts as an agent, both invisible and omnipresent in academia today [8,38].

Knowledge, in the same line as meritocracy, has agency of its own [14,18,39]. It changes, transforms, and takes new characteristics in different contexts, immersed in discursive, non-human, and material entanglements. Zero-point epistemology, as a normative and unmarked form of knowledge, is a continuance of western supremacy and colonial agency [10]. Entanglements of academic rationality co-act with material-discursive enactments of objectivity, development, and ontological complicity [13,40]. Ontological complicity is understood with the metaphor of a fish swimming in water [8]. There are subjects who are totally at home in academia. They have immediately a feel for the game and the water. They have embodied knowledge and dispositions that are exercised in a spontaneous way, a tacit normality resembling the demands of the academic game [13]. They act through ontological academic complicity, unconscious of how historical, cultural, material,

discursive, and social knowledge are embedded and sedimented in academic culture and meritocratic practices [28]. However, some subjects, like non-western academic females in this study and myself, are unable to embody the objectivity and neutrality in which universities present themselves. We are always gendered and racially marked through the materiality of our bodies. We can never become universal academics since our knowledge is always embodied, visible, and situated where we conduct our research [14]. It is difficult for the fish to describe and feel the water, as it is for Norwegian academic fish to articulate their own realities in Norwegian academia [40]. As a non-western academic woman, I am acutely aware of the way academia insists on our adherence to a Eurocentric, white, and paternalist gaze. Thus, I approach this work through the fusion of feminist posthuman and decolonial perspectives, believing that the present era of globalization and neoliberalism necessitates new ways of thinking and restructuring higher education. Academia can no longer be assumed as an objective, static, and neutral institution. With this article, I want to bring light to embodied knowledge, leaning on Haraway's encouragement of new stories that have interruptions and reformulations [41] (p. 128).

The aim of this article is to disclose embodied knowledge, diffracting contemporary academic life and unveiling its epistemological, gendered, and ethnic foundations. Subject positions in female academic's life may incite awareness of how academic ideals of objectivity and neutrality are powerful technologies to craft subjectivities, enabling the reproduction and legitimation of power relations [42]. Disguising the way in which academia is related to broader configurations of power, hierarchies, and cultural normativity may cause grief and resistance [40], as we will see throughout this article.

3. Methods

The empirical material of this study was collected in two different periods: spring 2020 and winter 2021. In the first period, two separate conversations were conducted with two female academics, and in the second period, four separate conversations were conducted with four female academics. Participants were originally from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America. The same questions and procedures were implemented in both periods. The conversations lasted between 1 and 2.5 h, and they were recorded on tape and transcribed. The empirical material consists of 113 transcript pages. Participants are non-western women arriving to Norway for studying or marrying a Norwegian man. They all have all middle- or upper- socio economic backgrounds from their original country, and they all came to Norway in adulthood. They represent a wide variety of scientific fields, including architecture, social anthropology, preschool pedagogy, medicine, engineering, and social work. Their positions at the university are as follows: Ph.D. candidate, post-doctoral student, Lecturer, Associate Professor, and Full Professor. I selected participants by asking colleagues whether they knew any foreign academic women I could interview. This recruitment process took a long time due to the limited number of female academics with non-western ethnic backgrounds in Norwegian academia. The aim of the conversations was to know about their trajectories, anecdotes, and stories related to their academic careers and lives. The conversations frequently took unexpected turns, where meetings evolved into academic conversations characterized by encounters between colleagues. This involved a dynamic whereby the researcher and participant mutually articulated and questioned dominant notions of being a female, ethnic minority academic. This affective mutuality and trust influenced both of our embodied knowledge, where affectivity and bodily sensations often led to resemblance and reciprocity [14]. This process led to a change from traditional qualitative analysis based on coding and categorization, to diffractive analysis inspired by Barad's theorizing [17]. For this article, I decided to use fragments from three of the six participants. This decision was taken based on the permitted length of this article, and the fact that all the six participants describe complex life stories that resembled each other's. Here, I will present fragments of the stories of Aisha, Dalila, and Indira.

For reasons of anonymity, the participants will be mentioned with fictive names and broadly connected to their scientific field (e.g., science, humanities, or social science). Their

academic position and age will also be mentioned broadly, and they will not be connected to their specific national belonging. This study has been reported to NSD (Norwegian Center for Research Data), fulfilling ethical and privacy requirements.

Thinking Diffractively

I entered assemblages of non-western academic women being an academic woman from South America myself. Sharing assemblages with the participants, I plugged mine into theirs [43]. The plugging allowed me to grasp discursive-material entanglements that both constrain and expand academic subject positions [44]. I use diffraction as a tool to highlight entanglements of material-discursive phenomena in the academic world. Diffraction is inspired by Barad's agential realism, emphasizing ongoing processes in which materiality and meaning are co-constituted [17,18]. Agential realism is an onto-epistemological framework ascribing agency not only to humans but to non-human and more-than-human beings as well [45]. Through my own embodied knowledge, I became aware of how material discursive entanglements expand the view available to the researcher only through words. I realized that these women's academic life contained more than I could grasp rationally with the limits of language, discourses, relations, and theoretical concepts. I am also part of the studied group. My situatedness and affects influence how I try to understand non-western women in Norwegian academia [36]. The diffractive turn started by recalling and recognizing my own and the women's affects, in addition to bodily sensations prompted by the conversations. Affects and bodily sensations are part of assemblages [14]. The diffractive turn consisted in recognizing embodied resemblance evoked in my own body, and feelings and sensations evoked by the encounters with the participants.

When we start from the premise that bodies have agency, we must use new methodological ways [37]. Haraway's concept of situated knowledge is important to elaborate this kind of insight generated from embodied affects. The commitment to entanglements of personal, affective, and embodied knowledge is the place from which new kind of theorization can emerge. Using the metaphor of knowledge as vision, Haraway argues that a nuanced understanding of vision and perception demonstrates that an object of sight, or an object of knowledge, cannot be conceptually removed from an embodied context, in other words, from a situated point of view [14]. Immersed in these women assemblages, I encountered in myself the same sensations of invisibility and excessive visibility expressed by them. I recognized my own feelings of misplacement that my colored body generates in different academic settings, coming in touch with sensations of not fitting into objective and neutral standards of academic excellence and individual merit. These sensations have for a long time been part of my being and acting in academia, although at the unconscious level, triggering grief, resistance, and epistemic disobedience. Diffraction involves entering and immersing the assemblage; making new connections; and examining entanglements of bodies, texts, data, materiality, language, discourse, relations, and theory in different and unfamiliar ways [43]. Barad states: 'practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated [...] we know because we are of the world' [17] (p. 185). In this understanding, we come to know/learn as beings of a world in ongoing becoming or 'worlding'; all distinctions are effects of specific entanglements, enacted in specific phenomena, and events/phenomena are emergent and dynamic, always in an ongoing doing mode and enactment [18]. Thus, diffraction is an embodied engagement with the data: a becoming-with the data as a researcher [36]. There is not an objective world outside us that we try to represent. Both researcher, participants, matter, nature, and space are part of entangled assemblages [14]. Diffraction aims to understand the world from within, in the sense of subjectivity and preconceptions of the researcher [36,44]. So, parallel with the recognition of my own worlding in the position of being a minority academic woman, I am aware that much of the analysis that follows corresponds to white academic women in Norwegian academia as well [31,32]. I find it very difficult and arduous to separate the significance of gender and ethnicity in analysis of becoming. Being both a woman

and an ethnic minority, I can only express the world through my own entangled and intertwined subject position. I realize that white Norwegian women also must cope the patriarchal, meritocratic, and neoliberal gaze in academia [28–30]. However, in the analysis that follows, intersections of being a non-western academic woman will be highlighted through diffraction.

4. Bodies in Grief

Fragments of Aisha and Dalila's lives are presented here. Aware of the limitations of these partial and incomplete entanglements, I open my bodymind sensitivities, entering their material-discursive assemblages of events [36]. Plugging into enactments of differences and becomings, I think of this diffractive process as a transcorporeal and affective engagement [46] between participants and me [17].

4.1. Aisha

I met Aisha at her Department. She is a well-groomed PhD student from the Middle East. She wore a skirt and blouse, a feminine hairstyle, jewelry, and high-heeled shoes. Her department is medium-sized and part of the faculty of humanities, with almost as many women as men as academic employees. We had a conversation in a small meeting room since she did not have her own office, sharing it with other PhD fellows. We sat in front of each other with a round table between us during the conversation. We immediately established good feelings and trust since our gendered and racialized bodies resembled each other's. This is a small fragment of Aisha's story:

I am often viewed as a 'poor thing' at the department, as if I need help. As soon as colleagues here at the University meet a woman with a minority background who may be as strong as them or has strong opinions, they get surprised! I notice that it is almost a shock for them: 'and you say that!', they say, for example. I can tell you a story from the kindergarten of my children: My daughter was having a performance. The boys would play guitar and the girls would wear pink ballerina skirts and dance. My daughter wanted to play guitar; she did not want to be a ballerina. The staff did not take this into account, so I had a talk with them. The answer I got from the kindergarten teacher was: 'Yes, of course, we can change your daughter. But what's so funny is that you're saying this. You, as a foreign lady, a lady with a minority background from a, yes, conservative country, you say this!'. I've had several similar experiences in academia.

Understanding Aisha's body as a space of transit, as an open-ended system entangled with material-discursive assemblages [36], I sensed the incongruencies Aisha experiences every day in the way her body is perceived by others, and how she perceives and senses herself. This paradox is partly caused by racialized and gendered entanglements attached to her body. Aisha has difficulty handling her subjectivity as 'a real academic', due to the continuous perceiving of her body as poor, less worthy, and in need of help. When Aisha is viewed through dynamics of gendered as feminine and racialized as 'the other', she gets trapped in normative ideas of belonging to a territory and a gender representing the underdeveloped, inferior, and uncivilized [47]. At the same time, Aisha enacts in material-discursive entanglements of a good-looking and well-groomed woman, projecting a resourceful body. Thus, at work, Aisha is hypervisible and invisible at the same time. Hypervisibility refers to scrutiny based on a perceived negative difference, which is usually (mis) interpreted as deviance [15]. The hypervisibility of Aisha enacts as 'the other', as a racialized and gendered body, due to multiple deviations from the objective normality of zero-point epistemology and ontological complicity in academia [8,9]. Aisha's deviance is magnified through constant reminders of her body not being an insider, a real academic, while she still tries to unsettle the 'established zero-point epistemology'. Aisha is aware of how to interrupt zero-point epistemology by expressing 'strong opinions', surprising colleagues in academia. She understands how to unsettle her 'entrapment' as 'a poor thing' at her department, using her gender and color, expressing liberal ideas. Aisha is conscious

of others perception of ethnic minority women from ‘conservative backgrounds’, but she actively decides to move the status quo becoming something richer and multiple.

Aisha’s story of her daughter’s performance in kindergarten unveils how materiality enacts and influences the lives of non-western woman. Aisha’s body is gendered and racialized, symbolizing other qualities than of an academic of excellence, leading to infantilization: a person assumed to have reduced capacities, as a poor thing, as if she needs help [13] (p. 60). Although Aisha is a well-groomed, good-looking woman, this is not enough to be regarded as ‘a real academic’. Aisha experiences epistemic exclusion, lacking recognition of her embodied knowledge as an academic woman. When a body is considered to be without gender or race, it is a sign of its positioning is the privileged norm [15]. Its power emanates from its ability to be seen as normal, unmarked, without corporeality. Its gender and race remain invisible, a non-issue [13] (p. 57). Aisha will never be defined in this unmarked position, due to hypervisibility of her body and gender, and the symbols this reproduces in academia. According to Dominguez, colonization splits the mind from sensations, adapting bodies and feelings to a colonial zero-point epistemology that reproduces structures of power and privilege [8]. At the same time, the story of Margaret’s daughter playing guitar unsettles the teacher’s perception not only about what a boy or girl should be allowed to do but also the perception of how ethnic minority female academics should be and act in academia. Aisha is in many ways moving the world of academia, changing possible enactments of becoming something other.

During the conversation with Aisha, entanglements of her body, gender, religion, and ethnicity emerged as obstacles for Aisha’s achievement of individual merit as an unmarked academic. Aisha is aware of the lack of recognition of her individual subjectivity and embodied knowledge. The way she is perceived through lenses of deviance and othering unveils ignorance about how racialization, patriarchy, and meritocracy still force the individual to meet criteria of merit in higher education. Aisha’s story is one of becoming misinterpreted, sensing grief, and unveiling failure in the myth of equal opportunities of meritocracy. Bringing Aisha’s embodied knowledge to light unveils the existence of power hierarchies in Norwegian academic meritocracy, disclosing the existence of zero-point epistemology that influences Aisha’s academic career in negative ways [48]. Nevertheless, Aisha’s history shows she constantly tries to move zero-point epistemology in academia.

4.2. Dalila

I met Dalila at a pedagogical course for educators/lectures at the university. She is visibly not Norwegian, so I approached her asking if she would participate in this study. Dalila is in her 40s, originally from Africa, and has lived in Norway for almost 20 years. I visited Dalila at her department, where she works as a lecturer, mainly with teaching assignments. The conversation took place in a meeting room. We sat in front of each other, with a table between us. Both our racialized and gendered bodies, and the affective and trusting contact we established during our meeting, led to a 2.5 h-long friendly conversation. Dalila is an extremely reflective woman, bringing many thoughts about enactments and becomings of ethnic minority women in Norwegian academia [36]. She was a substitute lecturer for many years before she got a permanent teaching position at her department. This fragment gives a picture of Dalila’s academic trajectory:

It is very hierarchical in academia. Minority women are below Norwegian women, and they are below Norwegian men, so I am doomed to go through several stages to be able to rise and be seen. In academia, you must be tough, and you must be clear. That makes you be very careful with how much you share to others, because it can be used against you. You rather go to the bathroom and cry alone than stand in front of people and cry, because then you have given others the opportunity to step on you. I feel I often need to remind colleagues that ‘I can do this, I have done that before’, and ‘I do not need to hear this from you, I already know that’. I use more energy than my colleagues to stand out and be respected. Even though we are in academia, these are the myths, and they still exist. It occurs when I want to make an input in a meeting, with several people present.

Especially male professors say much of the same things that I say in meetings. When people present say: I totally agree with you! Well said! Then I think to myself: that was exactly what I said earlier! Well, it's all about where the good arguments come from. In occasions, when I am only co-responsible in processes involving several others, it is not always my input is included in discussions. In these forums I must be clear, raise my voice and do something extra to be heard. The only opportunities I got to directly influence decisions at work, is when I am the only responsible for the outcomes. The only thing I have experienced that really helps, is to have a type of expertise that is unique and sought after. You must make yourself unique and special, you must know something that no one else masters. People can say what they want, but if they ought to go through you and your knowledge to get ahead, this gives you a position in academia. Only then you can be acknowledged.

I remember the conversation with Dalila with grief. Dalila's objectification involved not perceiving her as fully human. Despite good political intentions, Dalila's story shows the ways she is captured in assemblages of zero-point academic epistemology and ontological complicity, where her body is defined as out of place through entanglements of whiteness, paternalism, objectivity, scientific thinking, etc. [13]. On one hand, Dalila is hypervisible as a conspicuous, colored body, made representative of a particular rather than a general definition of real academics. Dalila is a representative of diversity and color at her department, and her bodily presence symbolizes tolerance and multiculturalism as current affairs. On the other hand, she is invisible, a common shared experience of female academics across colors [2]. Dalila struggles to be seen as an equal intellectual, competent, and capable academic, entrapped by her gender and color, reinforcing assemblages of otherness. Her body entangles with academic assemblages of Western scientific thought, zero-point epistemology, objectivity, and proper academic rules, creating material-discursive assemblages that violate Dalila's personal boundaries and integrity as a human being and an academic [49].

Zero-point epistemology materializes through a specific bodily behavior in academia, characterized by repression of bodily spontaneity, gestures, expressions of affects, and embodied sensations. The proper academic body is characterized by self-discipline and self-control; extensive use of logical thinking through well-articulated, formal vocabulary; and *Bildung*, a 'formed and proper way' of enacting with other academics. I sense *Bildung* as an important entanglement in the formation of bodily behavior in academia. *Bildung* is characterized by a set of general knowledge, cultural behavior, and insights that society considers high-quality and acceptable. *Bildung* is a linguistic, cultural, and historical term that can be replaced by synonyms such as 'refinement' and 'good upbringing' [50]. For Dalila, *Bildung* entangles with normative cultural and bodily behavior that do not resemble her own body, creating assemblages of western paternalism and elitism. In these zero-point assemblages, Dalila enacts as vulnerable, perceived as an inferior and second-hand intellectual. Although colored bodies in predominantly white spaces are hyper visible as different, they are always under assimilative pressure to conform to normative white behavior in academia. They are expected to enact as an unmarked upper/middle class, white Norwegian academic [2]. Enactments of a proper academic body makes Dalila's body a space invader [13], causing the need to 'be clear, raise my voice and do something extra to be heard', as Dalila states. On the other side, we see how Dalila, in her way of being and doing, is unsettling the '*Bildung*' in academia. She has found that to disturb the dichotomies of academia 'you must know something no one else masters. People can say what they want, but if they ought to go through you and your knowledge to get ahead, this gives you a position in academia'. It is her strength, despite the grief, her ability to disrupt unfortunate circumstances that is moving the world of academia. Dalila's pretense in academia is slowly changing the status quo.

In addition, physical arrangements of academic meeting rooms create material-discursive assemblages of othering. Pedagogically designed neutral rooms with soft colors, little decoration, a big table in the middle and several chairs around, a projector, and a blackboard

on the side of the room to which participants turn to, create an atmosphere of scientific objectivity and neutrality. Academics frequently bring their own PC and telephones to meeting rooms, as reminders of their business. This meeting becomes part of the enacting of (in)formal academic behavior rules, often with unmarked, white academics sitting around. Performativity is judged by good or bad academic behavior. Physical spaces in formal academic meeting rooms do not provide an atmosphere permitting relaxation and confidentiality, embracing embodied knowledge [13,38].

While I immerse in Dalila's material-discursive assemblages, I sense how she feels trampled at meetings, with colleagues, and in decision situations. It is impossible for her to express embodied knowledge in public, making her go to the bathroom to cry alone. Dalila's colored and 'ethnic' body, her gender, and academia's ubiquitous position in western, scientific, and zero-point epistemology trap her in assemblages of othering and ontological complicity. Therefore, Dalila's taking part in assemblages is characterized by grief of being a space invader, a body out of place [13]. Embodiment and the recognition of embodied knowledge is a condition for knowing—it makes knowing possible [49] (p. 416). We cannot create knowledge without being embodied, without being in contact with the whole subject, both the mind, the body, and the soul. Academic material-discursive assemblages of objective, neutral, and research-based knowledge are sedimented in the Cartesian worldview, where body and mind are separated from each other and where the researcher is detached from his/her own creation of knowledge [45].

By disengaging from colleagues and from cooperation processes at work, Dalila is not able to develop positive relationships with others who could be friends, supporters, or allies, important dimensions of networking in academia [2]. To be open is to express embodied knowledge, and expressing embodied knowledge makes her vulnerable 'to be stepped on', as Dalila describes. This makes for a solitary position in academia. As Dalila also mentions, the only way to be recognized in academia is 'making yourself particular, knowing things only you know'. As Lecturer in a highly competitive institution, this is an extremely difficult task. I still do not understand how Dalila still stands up, after hearing her academic trajectory of grief and entanglements of othering. Dalila is one of the strongest women I have ever met. I hope she can realize one day how important her presence is for future generations of ethnic minority female academics.

5. Transgressive Women

In this part, we will immerse ourselves in assemblages of Indira's academic trajectory. I contacted Indira through mail correspondence, searching for participants to conduct this study. Indira agreed to join, and I recognize that I approached her with preconceptions of othering and grief. Meeting Indira astonished my prejudices and changed the course of this diffractive analysis.

Indira

I met Indira outside her office. The buildings around the University campus were large and complicated, and it took a while before I found Indira's department. Indira welcomed me to her office, and I entered a large and bright room with large windows at the end of the hallway. Indira's office was nicely adorned with plants, pictures, and decorations. It had a table to receive guests, nice chairs around, and a comfortable sofa I could sit in. Indira sat on a chair at the other side of the table. Behind her I could see her huge desk full of books, articles, papers, notes, and a huge computer screen. I could feel that Indira was a busy and important woman, and I appreciated the opportunity she gave me to have a long and pleasant conversation between colleagues. Indira is Full Professor and Vice Dean at her faculty. She is originally from South Asia, living in Norway for over 20 years. This is a fragment from Indira's academic life:

What helps is that one must consciously project a confident self-image in front of others. If I want respect for the fact that I am a professional, on equal foot with others, I must appreciate the professional opinions for which I want recognition. This must deliberately

be projected to others. I think it is an advantage to come from another culture, not be incorporated into just one cultural reality, but having the capacity to think new, differently, and 'out of the box'. One can lose nuances when one is monocultural. Being multicultural helps me to see things from the outside, both here in Norway and in (my home country). I have probably absorbed some of the Norwegian culture after all these years, but at the same time I feel that I possess the ability to see things from different perspectives. This is highly valued at this department . . . But I also have good and bad days. It's not like I have a lot of confidence every day. I have also felt very frustrated because I'm not been seen or heard the way I want. I have noticed how the combination of race, age, and gender has led me not being recognized in some academic settings. This is especially relevant for minority women who don't speak good Norwegian, who speak broken, with an accent. Fortunately, it happens less and less often in my case. In recent years, I have often experienced being the person with the longest period sitting around the table in academic meetings. I carry this department's story with me, and I have seen how the institution have changed. It has helped me to get a respected position at both, my department, and at the faculty.

What is surprising from Indira's entangled reality is the way she, with her whole body, radiates calm, respect, and self-confidence. Even though she came to Norway in her 20s to obtain a Ph.D., she has worked her way up to the top of the academic hierarchy. As Dalila suggested in the previous story, Indira has managed to make herself particular and special, possessing knowledge no one else has obtained in her department. Although Indira also has felt assemblages of grief in academia, she is successfully collaborating with material agents, which permits her being respected and unmarked at work today. In Indira's entangled reality, it seems that gender, ethnicity, and race have lost their power. It seems that reaching a Full Professor position surpasses racialized and gendered signs of her body, creating a respected position, making her confident and self-assertive. Her beautiful and big corner office with big windows, nice curtains, and decorations acts as performative material agents, reinforcing the visible and respectful academic position she has reached, contributing to a status of worth and admiration among her colleagues.

Indira has embodied the informal rules of behavior in academia, enacting appropriate performativities and becoming a trusted and respected colleague [13]. I am not sure if we, as academics, are conscious of the assimilative pressure posed by academic culture. Assumptions of 'a real academic' are idealized abstractions and entangled interconnections derived from Enlightenment, such as objectivity, neutrality, excellence, and individual merit. As Acker emphasizes, the academic position itself becomes abstracted from the person who performs it; it becomes an idealization [12]. Puwar argues that pleasant and articulate hybrid postcolonial colored bodies who speak like a book and act properly are much more suited in white elite spaces [13] (p. 113). Language and the appropriate social etiquette are central to these processes, seen as the ability to articulate legitimate academic language, and the voice of reason. For Indira, performing embodied academic professionalism through material agents such as her office, a professor position, and being one of the employees with the longest time at the department contribute to her enactments as 'a real academic'. It seems that Indira, as an embodied Professor, has become part of an unmarked academic body. I sensed this in relation to other foreign academics in lower positions, becoming racialized and gendered in much more obvious ways than Indira is. It seems that enactments of being in a Professor position, with all the material agents this position encompasses, make Indira unique and special, surpassing all other entanglements of otherness.

Czarniawska and Sevón write about transgressive women [51]. Transgressions, as material-discursive assemblages, are embodied and affective. Indira's position allows her to be unmarked, as entanglements of race and ethnicity disappear because she has 'made it'—she managed to climb up the academic ladder. It does not mean that she does not experience othering or essentialization in other assemblages, but in academia she has been given the status of 'worthy' because of her expertise, material agents such as her

office environment, and her academic experience. In Indira's case, she has managed to embody the correct abstraction of a Professor. She transgresses the limits of being an ethnic minority and women, forming contradictory assemblages to the usual stereotype of a 'non-western woman'. Indira is thus viewed as a different kind of a body out of place, a stranger in reverse, making her a transgressive woman [51] (p. 278). To expand this position, although Indira is unmarked, she is also a 'space invader' [13]. She is not able to ignore the boundaries she transgresses [40], living at the margins of being unmarked as a Professor but still visible through her racialized and gendered body. This transgressive position can be a menace in academia, unveiling normative assumptions of race, gender, paternalism, and zero-point epistemology, creating epistemic disobedience.

6. Epistemic Disobedience

To be able to give extended conceptualizations of entangled dynamics involved in Indira's academic life, epistemic disobedience [8] appeared as an analytical concept. Indira expresses the crossing of cultural borders as a kind of positive resistance [2]. She embraces multiple cultural perspectives as confident and creative entanglements [39]. She has affective and embodied knowledge of different cultural epistemologies through both her upbringing in the country of origin, and her life in Norway, appreciating the mingling and hybridity of both cultural assemblages. In a way, I sense embodiment of several cultural epistemologies and practices as the same embodied knowledge Indira describes when she mentions that her institute's story is 'in her': I carry this department's story with me, and I have seen how the department has changed.

Our life story is incorporated in our body; in every cell, neuron, and flesh of our being, our knowledge is transcorporeal [46]. Through diffraction, I sensed how Indira could demand recognition of her embodied knowledge because she is already in a respected and recognized position to claim for this. As a Professor, Indira uses her available material agents to enact resistance and claim for recognition of her cultural embodied knowledge and for her long history at the department. Indira emphasizes how she consciously must project a confident self-image in front of others to be recognized. Through Indira's embodiment of a Professor position, the physical office arrangements surrounding her, and her extended time as academic in the same department, she can openly articulate epistemic resistance as a multicultural academic, valorizing her own position as a multicultural transgressive female academic in relation to Norwegian monocultural academics. Indira transgresses academic ideals and assimilative pressures by demanding recognition of her embodied knowledge, and she can do this because of her academic position. Using diffraction, we can grasp more fluid and smooth spaces and not predefined, already existing paths [18]. Diffractive methodology resists binaries between fixed subjectivities and calls out for a rethinking of notions of identity and difference. Resistance and epistemic disobedience are transgressions, transcending fixity and binaries being imposed by categorizations of ethnic minority academic woman as bodies out of place [13]. Dominguez argues that we must humanize ourselves through epistemic disobedience [8]. For Indira, epistemic disobedience is a way to demand humanity and recognition, claiming value of her embodied knowledge as a multicultural professor. I wonder why Indira has to assimilate to invisible norms in enactments of a professor position for demanding recognition. The hierarchy of this academic position stills remains unquestioned and powerful, and Indira's assimilation becomes a proof of the success of meritocracy, hiding critical and discriminatory dimensions of this system.

7. Assemblages of Grief and Epistemic Disobedience

As I write these words on a grey, rainy day, discussions regarding diversity in academia still emphasize the entry of ethnic minorities and gender equality. Immersing myself into ethnic minority academic women's assemblages, I question the assumed gender and ethnic blindness of meritocratic principles in Norwegian academia. The purpose of this study has been bringing to light locally situated, embodied knowledge, diffracting on assemblages

of contemporary academic meritocracy and disclosing their epistemological, gendered, and ethnic foundations. The diffractive analysis unveils the myth of color and gender blindness in academia, as well as the myth of sameness through meritocracy, both enacting through invisible entanglements of whiteness, western, and Enlightenment definitions of 'an academic of excellence'. As we have seen, entanglements of grief are more prominent for Aisha as a PhD fellow and Dalila as a Lecturer, and not so prominent for Indira who is in a high-status academic position. It seems that grief turns into epistemic disobedience, diminishing the power of gendered and racialized bodies in high academic positions. Indira is successfully using the power of material agents surrounding her, such as office arrangements, a Professor position, and time. Aisha and Dalila as well use their ability to disrupt and open up the status quo using their gender, ethnicity, and color.

However, assemblages of academic foreign women are based on cultural assumptions of who they are, as we saw in the fragments of Aisha and Dalila. These entanglements are interconnected with zero-point epistemology, creating notions of universal standards of objective research-based knowledge [38]. Aisha and Dalila expressed embodied entrapment through their gender, skin color, and bodies, a fixity they can never escape from. In this article I have also shown how assemblages of meritocratic achievement are entangled with the myth of same opportunities through hard work. Merit is portrayed as blind, without a body. Academic entanglements of individual merit are enacted through: '*your problems are all your fault . . . your privileges are all your own achievements*' [52] (p. 290).

Through diffraction I have shown how zero-point epistemology, whiteness, and paternalism are invisible, and how successful academic practices often involve the skilled production of an unmarked, universal body [14]. Invisibility works in favour of dominant group members because they are 'normal, and unnoticed' [15]. Through the contradictions of subjects who are different [40], and the absence of embodied knowledge in academic meritocratic systems [48], I have shown how ethnic minority women develop a highly developed sense of their own difference and possibilities [13]. They are aware that their difference is not embraced as some multicultural, diversity notion of difference. Rather, they are marked through a negative difference, as a deficit. This negative difference is perceived in relation to the 'natural', the 'ordinary', the hubris of zero-point epistemology [8]. The so-called color- and genderblind standards impose whiteness and Western superiority as the norm. However, it is these women's strength and resistance, despite their grief and their ability to disrupt their circumstances *using* their gender and color, that is moving the world of academia, albeit slowly, to accept others as academics—not as in a dichotomous positioning, but as one of a multiplicity.

Notions of fairness and meritocratic judgement are embedded in very specific, historically located corporality that is difficult to see [14]. It seems that standing at the margins makes ethnic minority women able to see the absurdities of white, paternalist, and Western academia very clearly. Diffractive analysis makes us aware of our embodied involvement with the materiality of events, implying responsibility and ethics [36]. Those immersed in ontological complicity do not feel the weight of water, and they do not see the tacit normalcy of their own specific bodies who are able to pass as neutral, universal, and objective [13] (p. 132). Nevertheless, it is also important to recognize Norwegian women academics and their ongoing struggle with the gaze of patriarchy, meritocracy, and the masculine 'Bildung' in academia [29,30,32].

In this study, participants are expected to hide aspects of themselves to appear in a particular form to be able to be recognized as true academics. This is contrary to democratic human principles such as freedom of expression and the human right to be oneself, pillars in the spirit of intellectuals. Academia thus produces fragmented academics, dehumanizing individuals through depriving parts of their humanity, as the unveiling the racialized and gendered power of academic meritocracy abate faith on the Promise of Education.

Reading the participants' stories of embodied knowledge, we see how they enact resistance against privileging points of view, acknowledging our interdependence and co-existence with other bodies, with materiality, and with non-human agents in the world.

For Indira, reaching a top academic position gives her a unique opportunity to resist fixed assumptions, gaining support in material agents, time, and space, where she is able to transgress entanglements of othering. The question here is why Indira must embody another universal standard (as a Professor) to be able to rise and being recognized. Why must Indira assimilate into abstracted rules of an academic professor position to be able to demand for recognition of her embodied knowledge? As she transgresses her gendered and racialized body, is not she only successfully transgressing some entangled entrapments, while still bounded up to other academic standards, such as Bildung; elitism; and upper-class standards that remain unquestioned, normalized, and omnipresent? Disclosing the agency of discursive materiality and non-human agents can have political consequences for inclusive practices in higher education, relying on insights of the force of material discursive entanglements as performative agents [36].

The idea that humanity can be transformed and transcended for the better unables us to question the foundational assumptions of who is human and who is regarded as worthy in academia [48]. It is these women's presence, strength, and abilities to disrupt the status quo that is moving the world of academia today. It is of vital importance to move discussions of diversity in higher education to a place where we can value other epistemologies and transgressive subjectivities, recognizing the embodied and locally situated knowledge. Finally, all this is about accepting academics as holding positions of multiplicity, disrupting old-fashioned dichotomies of who is allowed to be 'a real academic'.

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