

# Rethinking gender equity in the contaminated university: A methodology for listening for music in the ruins

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## Abstract

This paper offers a new way to engage with gender, race, and class relations in academic leadership and organizations. Viewing our research materials through different images helps us to ask new questions, open up new kinds of answers and ultimately other ways of knowing gender and leadership in academia. Our approach has three connected steps. Firstly, we engage with the ruins of the three main promises upon which the contemporary university has been built: enlightenment, liberalism, and feminism, drawing on Anna Tsing's mushrooms at the end of the world and Gibson-Graham's notion of a post-capitalist economy. Secondly, we use intersectionality as a methodological lens, combining it with Karen Barad's ideas about how "matter comes to matter." We explore the intersections between four themes arising from the accounts of our participants: Reshaping the disciplinary field; gender, class, and race; traveling and mobility; and Institutional structures and policies. The third and final step engages with how some women successfully coordinate these intersecting themes to navigate their careers and achieve leadership positions within the contaminated and ruinous university environment. In doing so, we draw on the musical form of the fugue

Kirsten Locke, Rebecca W. B. Lund, and Susan Wright contributed equally to this study.

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with its four themes that at different moments diverge, clash and, if successful, achieve resolution, to provide us with a way for analyzing the women's stories as "polyphony-in-action." By using this musical approach to retool intersectionality, we are able to show how some women managed to bring all four themes of their lives into symbiosis and achieve value in the ruinous academic landscape.

#### KEYWORDS

gender in academia, intersectionality, mattering, post-capitalism, ruins, the fugue, university leadership

## PROLOGUE

*So it was really, it was actually for me it was a big career decision at that point because I was offered the job [at a British university] and turned it down. So at that point I had also applied for this job here in New Zealand because there weren't many jobs coming up in England, so we thought we'll go overseas maybe for three years. And I applied here and actually, turning the other job down in England was really important to me to actually work out where I wanted to sit as an academic. And I wanted to be in a business school ... I do feel in some ways I can see how I might not fit within the business school but actually I completely do.*

*I am sure there are lots of things I could talk about but I think that there are those kind of couple of pivotal moments, and I have not really reflected on what I have been talking about. I have not really sort of thought about when I turned a job down as actually being quite pivotal as well, and actually it was.*

On a warm November's day in 2016, the authors of this paper sat in a small office at a New Zealand university and interviewed Samantha<sup>1</sup> about her academic career. Samantha was an animated and enthusiastic interviewee who spoke about her journey to professor with candor and insight. This excerpt provides a threshold to the intentions of this paper and our methodology by offering a small example of the ways we have interpreted meaning from the women leaders who spoke to us and shared their experiences and feelings about navigating academia. We offer this excerpt to the reader as a capsule to consider the complexities and idiosyncrasies of gendered lives lived in academic contexts, and the common themes that we were able to identify among these complexities. Samantha highlights a theme of travel and mobility that is immediately obvious. She was able to move from England to Aotearoa New Zealand, and this move would prove to be influential in preparing her for a relatively speedy rise to professor. In the interview, when given the opportunity to reflect on crucial turning points in her career, Samantha spoke of a pivotal moment that turned out to be significant. There are other dimensions that can be extrapolated from this short excerpt. Samantha alludes to the textured element of career progression, where "progress" is far from straightforward and in this case involved turning down an academic position that would have enabled her to move close to her family home. Instead, she chose a job that offered new ways to fulfill her disciplinary aspirations. Further texture is evoked through Samantha's articulation of career rhythms and pacing; her career gathers momentum as she makes the decision to prioritize her feelings of comfort and decides to stay on when she sees herself fitting in to the institutional context in New Zealand. For the authors of this paper, our challenge has been to honor the voices and intentions of the women who spoke to us and to find a way to bring conceptual cohesion to these voices. This paper tells the intellectual story of how we developed the methodological framework to achieve this aim. Our focus is on methodology, which we perceive as a strategy for knowledge (in contrast to methods which are

tools for implementing a methodology). Our methodology involved bringing literatures together from philosophy, sociology, and anthropology to generate a particular onto-epistemological outlook, which prompted us to rethink key concepts and the relationships between them. We hope that readers can find inspiration in our methodological approach and its conceptual coordinates, not only for their own research but also to find ways to dislodge feelings of inevitability about the current forms of the university and create more liveable institutions.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper begins with a problematic: that the existing forms of thinking about the ways women navigate universities do not enable us to explain how some of the 30 women interviewed for our research project achieved leadership positions, while others did not manage to convert stunning achievements into recognition and value. This issue emerged from a comparative project undertaken by the authors that looked at women in universities in Denmark and New Zealand. Between 2013 and 2019, the three authors interviewed 30 senior academics from a range of disciplines in New Zealand and Danish universities, two countries of similar size, with eight universities each, and both in the forefront of neoliberal university reforms. The interviewees all self-identified as women but were differently positioned in terms of age, gender, sexuality, class, nationality and ethnicity. Most of the interviewees were in senior academic positions as Associate Professors or Professors. All had occupied or were currently in formal named leadership positions such as Academic Head of Unit, Head of School, Chair of a research center or institute, Dean, or Pro-Vice Chancellor. All but two of the women were interviewed in their university offices (a recent earthquake required an alternative venue for one interview in New Zealand, and another interviewee requested her interview be held at a café to best suit her timetable). The project evolved as the university world changed during this period: it began as a study of the ways women navigated management and leadership positions in the university, but as reforms accelerated, the research focused on how women gained value for their activities in increasingly complex and multiple contexts.

The purpose of the paper is to present a methodology that we have developed to grapple with the range of ways that the few leading academic women navigated the changing university landscape. The statistics on gender and leadership are stark. The proportion of women academics in New Zealand's universities had reached 50% by 2017, but they were mainly in part-time positions and at the lower levels of the academic scale where women already predominated (Walker, Sin, Macinnis-Ng, Hannah, & McAllister, 2020, pp. 9, 14). Between 2012 and 2017, men made up 64%–69% of associate professors/heads of department and 74%–81% of professors/deans (ibid: 9). The gender distribution of professors and deans as a percentage of the total academic workforce remained exactly the same over this 6-year period, with 19.0% men and 5.3% women (ibid: 18; Tables A1 and A2). In Denmark in the period 2007–2017 there had been an overall 46% increase in academic positions but the percentage of women had only increased from 27% to 34% (Agency for Research and Education, 2019, p. 34 and 42), and the “scissor diagram” showing the distribution across the scale of academic positions showed only a slight narrowing of the gap between men and women (ibid: 17; Figure 1.4). From 2007 to 2017, the percentage of women completing the masters (kandidat) degree remained higher than men (rising from 53% to 56%), but still fewer women (43% in 2007, 49% in 2017) than men took a PhD. In 2017, women occupied only 40% of assistant professor positions (up from 38% in 2007), 33% of associate professorships (up from 27%), and 22% of professorships (an increase from 13% in 2007). In terms of university leadership in 2017, there was 1 woman rector (13%), 3 women pro-rectors (38%), 1 woman university director (38%), and only 1 out of 19 deans was a woman (13%) (ibid: 93; Tables 11.2 and 11.3).

This paper contributes to existing discussions about the gendered effects of neoliberalism, gender inequalities in academia, and recent contributions of post humanism/new materialism in feminist organization studies. Many articles in *Gender, Work, and Organization* have engaged with the gendered consequences of, and responses to, neoliberalism in working life, policy making, and leadership practices. They explore the ways in which neoliberal discourses and practices are appropriated and internalized, resulting in a deepening of already existing gendered

inequalities. There have also been several studies of the ways in which neoliberalism is contested and resisted in everyday practices at the work place and in feminist movements (e.g., Adamson, 2017; Berglund, Ahl, Pettersson, & Tillmar, 2018; Colley & White, 2019; Davies, Browne, Gannon, Honan, & Somerville, 2005; Granberg & Nygren, 2017; Grosser & McCarthy, 2019; Kemp & Berkowich, 2020; Rottenberg, 2019).

Zooming in on the institutional context of academia, plentiful research can also be found within feminist organization studies (e.g., Contu, 2020; Fotaki, 2013; Harding, Ford, & Fotaki, 2013; Huopainen & Satama, 2019; Pullen, 2018; R. Lund & Tienari, 2019; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2013). Much of the existing literature on gender in academia in *Gender, Work, and Organization* focuses on how gender inequality is produced and reproduced through the structures and policies, practices and discourses of management and leadership, quality assessment technologies, divisions of labor, precarity, time-use and ideal career paths, and also in gender equality programs (Bailyn, 2003; Benschop & Brouns, 2003; De Coster & Zanoni, 2019; Huppertz, Sang, & Napier, 2019; Ivancheva, Lynch, & Keating, 2019; Lund, Meriläinen, & Tienari, 2019; Rafnsdottir & Heijstra, 2013; Savigny, 2017; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012; Vayreda, Conesa, Revelles-Benavente & Ramos 2019). While an intersectional analytical perspective on organizing and organizational relations (Holvino, 2010) and a much needed tuning in to white privilege and sanctioned ignorance in research practice (Swan, 2017), has been encouraged, only a few have explored intersecting social relations in academia. Those who have engaged with a particular adaptation of intersectionality have focused on gender and “foreignness” in the context of neoliberal universities, to point towards the significance of double-strangeness or double-outsider status (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2008; Johansson & Sliwa, 2014, 2015; Sang, Al-Dajani, & Özbilgin, 2013; Strauss & Boncori 2018). Foreignness or migrant status, they argue, is both limiting and enabling within the merit-based individualized career-path system that characterizes contemporary universities. Indeed, while there has been an increased engagement with intersectionality in feminist organization studies, exemplified by studies of Muslim business women (Essers, Benschop & Dooreward, 2010), migrant job search (Ressia, Strachan, & Bailey, 2017), gendered aging in health-care work (Halford, Kukarenko, Lotherington, & Obstfelder, 2015), class and mothering (O'Hagan, 2018); gender and ethnicity in home-care entrepreneurship (Brodin & Peterson, 2019); and gender, nationality, race, ethnicity and class in hotel work (Adib & Guerrier, 2003), we have seen little engagement with the intersection of gender, race, and class in feminist organization studies focused on the academy.

In contributing to these existing stands of scholarship, we are inspired by what New Materialism and Post Humanist scholarship can offer us in terms of thinking through the gendered, raced, and classed relations in contemporary academia and, more specifically, women's academic leadership. We note that there are only a few papers in *Gender, Work, and Organization* engaging with these frames of thinking. However, they carry great promise for the further development of feminist organization studies. For example, Ergene, Calás, and Smircich (2018) draw on Latour (2004, 2008) “matters of concern, rather than matters of fact,” Rosi Braidotti develops a cartographic method and “creative figurations” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 163) while Gibson-Graham explore more-than-capitalist economies for fostering “discourses and practices for living well and living with others in the Anthropocene” (Ergene et al., 2018, p. 226). They argue that these approaches involve “associating the word critique with a whole set of new positive metaphors, gestures, attitudes, knee-jerk reactions, and habits of thought” with the purpose of seeing “what else may be real” (Ergene et al., 2018, p. 228). In the same manner, Gherardi's (2019) call for thinking and producing knowledge about gender differently provides an inspiring point of departure for our study. Gherardi seeks a process of knowledge production that prompts new ways of “imagining forward” in the post-Anthropocene (Lather, Pierre, & Elisabeth, 2013: p. 631). Amongst other things, this involves what Gherardi calls “thinking through concepts” as a way of orienting thinking and practice, in a Deleuzian manner, without a predetermined set of answers. Gherardi suggests that there is much to be learned by thinking about gender and sexual difference through diverging images, such as a “musical mode of thought” (Gherardi, 2019: p. 47). We are yet to see scholars taking up this cue in *Gender, Work, and Organization*. In this article we seek to engage with our research materials through different images that helped us to ask new questions, which open up new kinds of answers and ultimately other ways of knowing gender and leadership in academia.

## 1.1 | The politics of writing

Any new thinking needs new ways of writing. For example, “Feminine Writing of Organizations” calls for writing feminine, feminist and queer resistance to the ways that dominant patriarchal, capitalist and neoliberal orders suppress feelings, affects, playfulness and care (e.g., Ahonen et al, 2020; Ericsson & Kostera, 2020; Höpfl, 2000; Katila et al., 2019; Mandalaki & Daou, 2020; Phillips, 2014; Prasad, 2016; A. Pullen 2006; A. Pullen 2018; A. Pullen & Rhodes 2015; Rippin, 2015; Vachhani, 2015). The edited book *Writing Differently* (Pullen, Helin, & Harding, 2020) encourages us, among other things, to engage in writing as a micro-revolution for “overturning dysfunctional, perhaps rotten, sometimes corrupt, practices that inhibit knowledge and understanding,” working deeply with issues, embodying slow philosophy and identifying “non-instrumental ways of writing to each other” and “producing something new” to be “read and re-read,” “kept alive” (Pullen et al., 2020, pp. 1–8). In our case, we have tied our way of writing into our way of working. We are based in three countries (Norway, New Zealand, and Denmark) and although we managed to organize research visits so as to conduct the interviews in person and in pairs, for the last two years we have met every two weeks over skype to carefully discuss each interview and develop a schema for the analysis and a plan for the writing. These meetings have involved learning, listening, and being open to each other's disciplinary lenses and literatures. By coming to appreciate each other's contributions, we have developed a genuinely interdisciplinary approach that has affected the style and substance of our collective writing. Kirsten Locke brings a philosophical approach to engaging with the nature and purpose of universities. Rebecca Lund as an institutional ethnographer, has a heightened awareness of the gendered structural and intersectional complexities inherent in universities and knowledge production. Sue Wright takes an anthropological approach to the production and peopling of the policy landscapes of late-capitalist neoliberal universities. Central to the politics of this approach has been finding space and time in small cracks in the neoliberal university to learn from each other and rekindle excitement about our collective capacity for generating new ideas and new critique. We are aware that this is only possible because (pro tem) we have the privilege of salaried positions. Writing differently in this collective context has been slow and joyful, if painstaking, and has subverted and resisted the performative, individualized, and “fast” process of researching that is promoted in our neoliberal universities. Just as we recognized key moments in our participants' recounting of their academic lives, as a collective we also experienced pivotal moments that enabled deeper understanding of each other's, and our joint, research. An example of a key moment for our collective was when we traveled in person to Aarhus University to meet with Anna Tsing to talk about our project and discuss how to apply her ideas when thinking about the university as a ruinous landscape. This meeting, Anna's insightful engagement with us and our work, and her connecting with Kirsten as fellow musicians, helped us begin what would become this methodology paper.

## 1.2 | Our methodology

One of the features of our fortnightly conversations was to engage deeply and systematically with our data so the analytical framework emerged from an interplay between theoretical and ethnographic insights. Although the interview material was central to our thinking and conceptual shaping, it is not presented here as this paper focuses on the theoretical coordinates of our analysis. Our interviewees' voices and experiences have been foregrounded in other papers (Locke, 2015; Locke & Wright, 2017; Locke, 2018). As in any ethnographic study the results cannot be used a methodological tool-box but rather our aim is to present a way of thinking with data.

Our methodology takes three steps. First we explore the “ruins” of the three main promises on which the contemporary university has been built: enlightenment, liberalism, and feminism. We draw an analogy with Anna Tsing's depiction of how prized mushrooms emerged in the contaminated ruins of capitalist forestry policies to show how, equally unpredictably, within the university women can occasionally find a generative dynamic space with new connections yielding “patches” of unexpected growth and symbiotic life. Second, inspired by the concept

of intersectionality, we have identified intersecting themes at play in our participants' academic lives. Whereas intersectionality is usually used as an analytical tool to expose the multiple ways in which women are disadvantaged by the relationships between gender, race, and class, we use intersectionality as a methodological lens. Through an ethnographic process, we identify four intersecting themes in the women's accounts of their academic lives. These are: Reshaping the disciplinary field; Traveling and mobility; Institutional structures and policy; and Gender, Class and Race within the contaminated and ruinous university environment itself. The third step in our methodology is to analyze how some women successfully coordinated these intersecting themes to rise to positions of leadership as they navigated their careers in and through the contaminated university landscape. To do this, we draw on the musical form of the fugue with its four themes that at different moments diverge, clash and, if successful, achieve resolution, to provide us with a way of analyzing the women's stories as "polyphony-in-action." This enabled us to explore how the four themes were not only constraining, but how women played, resisted, maneuvered, navigated and sometimes reshaped features to their advantage. By using this musical approach to retool intersectionality, we are able to show how some women managed to bring all four themes of their lives into symbiosis and achieve value in the academic landscape.

### 1.3 | Ruins and contamination

We regard universities in New Zealand and Denmark as existing in the "ruins" of the three grand promises of modernity, liberalism, and feminism. On modernity, Jean-François Lyotard (1984) identified how the "grand narratives" that provided a framework for organizing society have fractured into a multiplicity of "little narratives." Liberalism, as one of those grand narratives, had held the promise of education as the vehicle for social and individual transformation and democratic participation. Through self-cultivation and social mobility, education was to generate a more equal society that countered inherited wealth and privilege. Universities were to be a micro-environment for fostering a democratic society, and be at the forefront of demonstrating what a society of ethnic, class and gender equality would be like. While universities may cling to that liberal vision, they increasingly know they have not been able to deliver this promised outcome. A final site of ruins is the feminist collective project of emancipation that was revealed as a western, heteronormative, white story line before it dispersed into multiple differences and loss of strategic essentialisms. These three failed promises build on Bill Readings' analysis of the *University in Ruins* (1996). Readings used Lyotard's postmodern argument to highlight the university's declining social role and increasing push toward efficiency and reductive (but compelling) notions of excellence. To resist the ethically corroding forces of hyper-individualistic neoliberalism and the increasing performativity of the institution, Readings called for alternative forms of thinking and living in academia.

To seek new forms of thinking, we looked for inspiration to the work of Anna Tsing (2015) and her particular articulation of ruins. Anna Tsing starts her story about the matsutake mushroom by explaining that it only grows in disturbed pine forests. Unexpectedly, in the ruins of clear cutting in California and in the replacement pine forests that were left unharvested when the commercial market collapsed, this mushroom, a highly prized gift item in Japan, began to grow. It was found by refugees from the United States. bombing campaigns in Cambodia and Laos who sought solace in the Californian pine forests that were somewhat reminiscent of home. Tsing explores the unlikely links between disparate sites and between people with totally incommensurate values through which a new capitalist chain of extraction occurs. The foragers in the West Coast forests sell the matsutake mushrooms they have collected in their own time and with a sense of liberty, to collectors who on-sell them to packers who commodify the mushrooms for sale in Japan. There, merchants approach the mushrooms not as commodities but as individual entities that are judged on the suitability of their qualities for particular clients. As any major transaction is accompanied by a gift of these prestigious mushrooms, clients present them to a future marriage partner or to seal a business deal.

Tsing articulates what at first glance seems a very postmodern argument: that capitalism can no longer be viewed as one unified organizing structure that follows a cohesive and normative narrative. Instead, Tsing explores the fragmentation and fraying of the threads of capitalism into what she describes as “patches” where exchange value can occur on the edges and through just one point of commensurability between people who are otherwise unconnected and pursue utterly different cultural activities and values. Important to our use of Tsing’s ideas is the way she stretches this capitalist analysis to make a broader critique of modernity and the accompanying ideas of progress and development. Tsing’s description of capitalist ruins provides an important context for understanding the philosophical coordinates of the concept of ruins as we will be using it, because she makes a link between the organization of capitalism in patches and the fragmentation of the modern liberal humanist “story” of progressive improvement that has been central to the idea of the university. In contrast to the emotional and moral weight that Lyotard attributes to fragmentation, Tsing’s “ruins” refrain from offering either a celebratory or bleak diagnosis. Instead, ruins are simply “there”; as result of human hubris, destruction, power and greed. They are contaminated in the sense that the disturbance of ecosystems has brought their elements into disarray but Tsing’s mushrooms also show how such a disrupted space has potential for recuperation, new beginnings and new connections. Importantly for Tsing, her ruins are an ambivalent space of multiple connections or contaminations, where profound discomfort sits alongside potential renewal, so that surprising and unpredictable things emerge. These ideas, when applied to the university, call not for resistance or triumphing over adversity but the ability to connect unexpected and divergent interests, values, people, ideas, and knowledges in liveable landscapes (Wright, 2017). Predation and destruction are a constant threat to those inhabiting the ruins of the university’s all-encompassing grand narratives but opportunities to connect the fragments in new ways may still be found among the patches and cracks in the story.

Taking a more activist stance, Gibson-Graham make a similar call to “think outside the capitalist axiomatic” (2006: p. 89) and not treat capitalism as an homogeneous and global force, despite its “sedimentations of practice” and “routinized rhythms” that have an “aura of durability and the look of structure” (2006: p. xxxiii). Instead, in their “politics of possibility,” they explore the range of non-capitalist relations that still exist in any locality or organization in order to identify “hopeful openings” for building more ethical communities. Using Plato’s term *chora* for a space of indeterminacy and movement between being and becoming, their approach is to “crack open the lenses of possibility” and “create the fertile ontological ground for a politics of possibility, opening the field from which the unexpected can emerge, while increasing our space of decision and room for maneuver as political subjects” (2006: p. xxx). If Gibson-Graham sought out and built on what they called generative “threads of hope” (2014: p. S152) in the cracks in the hegemony of capitalism, we envisage such threads similarly exist in the residue of the three grand promises of the university. Following Lyotard, if the grand narratives have fragmented into small ones, then we could call these threads of hope the “small promises” to be found amongst the ruins of the university.

The concept of the ruins is important to our methodological framing because it highlights the dynamic and changing character of the university landscape. This dynamism is important to our methodological construction because it depicts an environment that is in a perpetual state of flux and is highly contingent to the conditions of existence of our individual women participants while also containing radically similar aspects of movement and instability across different university settings. An important aspect of our conceptualization of the ruins is that the women themselves along with all the other features of the university landscape are shifting and morphing. In trying to convey this dynamic, we drew on Vigh (2009) concept of “navigation” as

motion within motion; it is the act of moving in an environment that is wavering and unsettled, and when used to illuminate social life it directs our attention to the fact that we move in social environments of actors and actants, individuals and institutions, that engage and move us as we move along (2009: p. 420).

The notion of “navigating” conveys how each participant was engaging with shifting subjective positions and subjectifying processes in a dynamic, unstable, and moving environment and how, as a corollary, the constitution of the ruins was also changed by our participants' processes of navigation.

In contrast to navigation at sea, women's navigation of the university landscape has long historical traces. The introduction of women in the 20th century into the monastic and ascetic tradition of the historically patriarchal university could be seen as “contaminating” the history of the university, and that “history” itself is contaminated by different historical threads that have been caught up and knotted together in a way that is part of the contemporary university. Tsing's concept of contamination resonates with Foucault's notion of genealogy, where thinking through Nietzsche, Foucault asserts that the “past actively exists and continues to secretly animate the present” (Foucault, 1991, p. 81). Tsing, like Foucault, reminds us that contamination itself is not to be seen in purely negative terms, even if it is the result of sinister histories. But whereas Foucault's genealogy is discursive, Tsing's contamination has a material dimension and is more akin to a science experiment that turns out differently than predicted. Humans and environments work on this principle of contamination and the intermingling of unexpected collaborations and connections. Tsing continues:

Collaboration is work across difference, yet this is not the innocent diversity of self-contained evolutionary tracks. The evolution of our “selves” is already polluted by histories of encounter; we are mixed up with others before we even begin any new collaboration. Worse yet, we are mixed up in the projects that do us the most harm. The diversity that allows us to enter collaborations emerges from histories of extermination, imperialism, and all the rest. Contamination makes diversity (2015: p. 29).

When looking at the university landscape in ruins, the addition of women into the cohort can be seen as adding to the diversity, and indeed infinite numbers of collaborations and unexpected connections have been made and continue to be made because of this addition. How strange modern universities would look if they had the same gender mix as even a few decades ago! However, while the contamination continues to occur, women seem not to have created value out of this diversity nearly to the same as extent as men. The notions of ruins, contamination and navigation cast our interviewees' stories in a different light and can potentially signal possible new avenues to explore. While most women occupy the shaded undergrowth of the university landscape, many of the women we interviewed had been able to push their careers into different climbs. They have identified and built on the “small promises” to be found in the ruins of academia. In the disturbed and contaminated landscapes of the university, women navigate, forage, survive, and sometimes, through unusual and unlikely connections, engage with these small promises and thrive in these ruined and contaminated surrounds.

## 1.4 | Intersecting themes

The second point of entry into our material is inspired by the analytical and methodological concept of intersectionality, which originates from black feminism (e.g., Collins, 1989; Crenshaw, 1990; Hooks, 1981) but has been taken up in diverging ways across a wide variety of contexts, including Nordic countries and New Zealand (e.g., Nora 2020; Smith, 1999). Intersectionality analyses the points of convergence between sociological categories of identification and differentiation in people's lives such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, race, age, dis/ability, and class. As a concept, intersectionality “emphasizes that the effects of these categories cannot be understood in isolation from each other” (Staubæs & Søndergaard, 2011: p. 45). The interrelatedness between these sociocultural categories and their effects is at the center of the concept. However, despite this common denominator, the uses of intersectionality have been rooted in different feminist traditions—such as the feminist standpoint approach or post-structuralism—and they differ with regards to how they conceptualize and consider questions of structure, recognition and agency.

For the purpose of this article, we turn to a poststructuralist reading of intersectionality as proposed by Staunæs and Søndergaard (2011) and Lykke (2010). This involves perceiving “subjects” as disciplined and constituted by intersecting power relations. People are actively engaged in the (re)production of, and resistance towards power relations that imbue identity categories such as gender, race, and class. Although none of the categories can be reduced to each other—being based in diverging histories—the constitutive relationship between them is too complex to be captured in “grand” structuralist narratives of capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism. Analytical emphasis is placed on micro-institutions where things play out in particular non-universifiable ways. Within particular local settings, it may be possible to point out how some social relations have been made to matter more than others (e.g., Hvenegaard-Lassen & Staunæs, 2020). For instance, the tendency in Nordic feminist intersectionality research has long been that gender matters, and *then* class, and *then* race; but in New Zealand the opposite is the case. This is an empirical question.

Rather than starting with the usual predetermined sociocultural categories of gender, race and class, for fear they would be too objectifying and downplay the complexity and variation in people's lived realities, we analyzed our interviewees' accounts ethnographically to identify the women's own criteria of relevance about the intersecting themes at play in their academic lives. In doing so we found that an analysis in terms of intersecting social relations of gender, class and race was not enough. The stories of our participants pointed to the varying impacts of reshaping their disciplinary field, traveling and mobility and institutional structures and policy, as well as gender. We outline each of these themes below.

### 1.5 | Reshaping a disciplinary field

One of the features of the women's accounts of how they aspired to or achieved leadership positions was that they had the capacity to do “break-through” research. All the women engaged in different ways with the reshaping of their disciplinary fields but they differed in the extent to which they were able to convert this into scholarly recognition and mobilize it to their advantage. For instance, some of the participants developed their discipline in a new direction by creating or drawing on communities outside of the university. These women made a success of applied or social-impact research that rarely gains academic prestige. Some of the participants took a more traditional route to leadership, by building a research institute or organization that was semi-independent from the university's hierarchies and structures. This gave them the flexibility to be more autonomous and responsive to their disciplinary field while having the intellectual freedom to extend their research and follow their interests. This is contrasted with participants who worked ‘inside’ the university, and were able to creatively exploit institutional structures that supported their research and disciplinary field, while others prioritized a career in leadership and left their research behind. Some women had clearly taken their discipline in a new direction, which excited their students but did not gain them institutional promotion or widespread international recognition. Participants also varied in their interest in using their discipline reflexively to analyze and improve the working conditions of their institution. The data explores the different approaches that women took to using their growing research profile or leadership status to support doctoral students, assistants and research groups, and how some of them found ways to improve institutional structures and alter power relations that not only created new openings for their own careers but made a difference to people around them.

### 1.6 | Travel and mobility

This theme explores the importance of our participants' ability to travel and be mobile at certain points in their careers and the different ways this played out between the New Zealand and Danish contexts. In New Zealand it

was difficult to advance without either coming from another country or spending a considerable amount of time abroad. Echoing a colonial past, status was especially awarded to those with qualifications and experience from British or European universities and many interviewees had used migration to New Zealand as a spring board for status and career advancement. In contrast, the Danish participants had predominantly grown up in Denmark and developed their careers 'at home'. For them, prestige came from spending a period of time at a foreign university during their doctoral studies, before building a career in one Danish university. This stability enabled Danish women to fulfill the ideal of having children and a family alongside a career. Whereas, compared to New Zealand, there were ample and easy opportunities for Danes to travel to international conferences, they were much less willing to spend time overseas once they had a university appointment. However, as in the other themes, the differences within the two groups of participants are explored to demonstrate the choices women made about travel and the way this manifested as value in their careers.

## 1.7 | Structures and policy

Our interviewees' accounts of their careers included many aspects of global processes of academic capitalism, neoliberalism and reform, and also referred to historical particularities and differences in the recent reforms of Danish and New Zealand universities. They reflected on whether and how they had experienced policies aimed at improving diversity or reducing inequalities. These included the bicultural educational structures and pastoral care practices shaping higher educational institutions in New Zealand, as well as the Danish 'Woman friendly' welfare state and the European Union's individualistic anti-discrimination policies. We treat these policies not as abstracted entities, somehow existing outside people's actual activities, but as features of the landscape with which some women formed synergies, while other policies were resisted or found limiting.

## 1.8 | Enacting gender

This theme engages with how our women interviewees enacted and performed gender and its intersection with race, ethnicity, sexuality, class and age. Each of the women in our research took up and activated culturally and historically conditioned dominant notions of gender roles, as well as discourses of gender equality, neutrality or inequality. Enacting gender played into the other themes of the disciplinary field and the university structures and policies that conditioned the possibilities and limitations of achieving a leadership career. Epistemic cultures and hierarchies imprinted a number of gendered, sexed, classed and raced assumptions, expectations and notions of value. Simultaneously, higher education policies and strategies shaped how women found ways to (re)produce or transform gender and intersecting relations in their everyday lives. Each woman's account of her career was influenced by her ideas of gender roles and class-infused sense of entitlement (or not) to academic promotion, and each was interwoven with the practical ways they planned their days and careers, especially if this involved childcare or elderly care or divisions of labor with a partner. We show how our participants' gendered and intersecting coordination of work at the university and at home, positioned them very differently in terms of their possibilities for advancement within academia.

These themes of the disciplinary field, travelling/mobility, institutional structures and policies, and gender emerged as markers of inclusions and exclusions, boundaries and possibilities in the gendered, classed and raced lives of our participants. They form what Barad (2003) has called "the material conditions of possibility of mattering." These themes are all features of the university landscape that interact with each other in the way that Tsing describes as contamination; they are products of human activity, at the same time as they have agency and act on people's lives. That is how particular inequalities arise, and how some things are made to matter and others are excluded from mattering. In navigating this landscape, some people gained the positioning and capacity to interpret

these themes for their own advantage, and others saw them as a wall they came up against and could not budge. However, individual women's positioning and capacity was not predictable. In this way we are flagging the dynamic and ever-changing nature of the contaminated and ruinous university landscape and the processual nature of the shaping of women's lives and possibilities. Indeed, some women successfully coordinated these intersecting themes to rise to positions of leadership as they navigated their careers in and through the contaminated university landscape. But how did they do this?

## 1.9 | Polyphony-in-Action

To analyze how women navigated the intersecting themes in their dynamic university landscapes, we drew on the musical form of the fugue with its four themes that at different moments diverge, clash, and, hopefully, achieve resolution. This provided us with a way of analyzing the women's stories as "polyphony-in-action": it enabled us to explore the ways women interacted within the limitations and the possibilities of the ruins to find and act on the "small promises" still available within the contaminated university. The fugue provided an apparatus to help interpret the unfolding movements of women's career trajectories and the key moments where value was created and the "material conditions of possibility of mattering" might emerge.

Whereas modernity demanded a melody with an accompaniment played by a heroic subject mastering his environment, the fugue is an art form which offers a structure in which different aspects are highlighted at different moments but are still in counterpoint with each other. Echoing our earlier point about the fragmentations of grand narratives into multiple postmodern small stories, the fugue too is composed of several themes. 'Such is the fugue', according to the cultural critic Rothstein (2000), "a drama not about the individual voice at large in a society of sound, but a drama about a society of sound created by related individual voices." In the fugue's structure, the subject is neither dominant, nor does it completely disappear; subjects still have agency but they are in a dynamic relation with others in ways that pose limitations and possibilities that are not always controlled by their agency.

The "drama" of the fugue, as demonstrated in piano performances by Nina Simone or compositions by J. S. Bach, lies in this cumulation of complexity. Movement and tension are created by no one theme being more dominant than the combination of all themes intersecting and interweaving together in harmonic and melodic convergence and divergence. The landscape of the fugue usually consists of four themes each identifiable through its own melody, just as we identified four themes arising from the stories of our women interviewees. These melodies unfold horizontally, just as the themes in the university landscape intersect in a flat ontology. The tonal structure is created vertically, not by a linear story but by the interaction of the melodies that create harmonic tensions and affect. The themes in the women's careers interact in ways that provide similar vertical moments of dissonance and tonal clash with possibilities of harmonic resolution and career propulsion. We use musically derived concepts from the fugue, to demonstrate and explore the particular flavor and character of the intersection between the four themes within the ruins of the university landscape. These characteristic concepts of the fugue are "rhythm"; "polyphonic layering"; "themes"; and "moments and serendipity." The rest of the section will deal with each of these concepts in turn, and their relation to our methodology and meaning-making processes in analyzing our data.

### 1.10 | Rhythm

The musical concept of "rhythm," that is constitutive of horizontal melodic shaping and vertical harmonic structuring in the fugue, has allowed us to view our participants' careers as unfolding at different tempos and at different points of time. Academic careers, unlike many different forms of professional work, are often long in the horizontal sense (in that they can span several decades of a person's life), and in the vertical sense (in that a career spans

different life phases such as having children, children leaving home, looking after elderly parents, caring for a sick partner, etc.). There are moments when the tempo quickens, where the convergence of certain themes intersects either “externally” in the form of structural policy change in the wider university environment, or through the intentional shaping and handling of the themes by the participants themselves altering their surrounding environment. For one of our New Zealand participants, a constellation of policies around biculturalism when intersected with her previous experience of working at a university with indigenous academics in the Pacific Islands, enabled her to be invited on to high-level managerial positions as an experienced practitioner although relatively junior academic. Her engagement with the power structures of the university when intersected with her previous experience at an overseas university, enabled the participant to position herself as a key player in formulating new policies to ensure Māori students and academics could properly thrive as members of her university. This quickened tempo to her career is contrasted by the much slower academic rhythms at the very start of her academic career, where the theme of enacting gender through childrearing responsibilities intersected with her research in ways that necessitated a slower but ultimately more steady intersection with the theme of building and reshaping her own disciplinary specialism that gathered momentum over time. This participant offers a multi-layered sense of rhythm, where parts of her academic “life” worked at differing tempos inside an academic career that also had its own sense of pacing and rhythm.

### 1.11 | Polyphonic layering

The fugal compositional approach of “polyphonic layering” is a concept that has proven fruitful when considering the career trajectories of our participants. In the Danish data gathering, all interviews began with a summary of the participant's academic career as available from their academic profile webpages. The approach taken in the New Zealand interviews included a focus of each participant's academic curriculum vitae at different points of the interview. In both interview settings and approaches, nearly all the participants pointed to the inadequacy of summarizing academic careers through the linear chronology of a curriculum vitae. Very rarely was career progress articulated as linear and procedural or as an uncomplicated process of moving seamlessly from one developmental point to another. Rather, at certain points different themes were emphasized and it was the cumulation of the layering of these themes and the polyphony that was created at the moments these themes intersected that helped propel and shape career trajectories. Our retooling of intersectionality with the concept of polyphonic layering allowed us to appreciate the ways participants described textured lives that coped with many things happening at once and consisted of layers of opportunities, limits and setbacks. This polyphonous and textured perspective to careers where limits occurred simultaneously alongside opportunity was observed by one of our Danish participants when she spoke about an art event that she curated as part of a large research platform she was developing. While the event was an enormous success, one of her male mentors approached her with a glass of wine in hand and casually enquired if she was worried she was becoming too successful. She described her utter frustration at feeling like she had to curb her excitement and success in deference to her more senior colleague just at the moment everything seemed to be coming together. The polyphonous quality in this example highlights the textured dimension to value-making that is hardly ever a straightforward “heroic” story of success, but is imbued with nuanced and multiple dimensions consisting of both challenge and generative opportunities.

### 1.12 | Theme

The four themes that emerged from the interviewee's accounts as prominent organizing devices for making meaning of their lives, take their shape and qualities from the musical concept of the “theme.” As a contained melodic “sentence” in the musical grammar of the fugue, the theme as a concept for analysis in our methodology

provides us with the ability to make complexity “stand still” for the purposes of analysis, but to be put back “into play” so that the dynamic of intersections and contamination could be observed. At some points in the women's lives one of the themes would become prominent, only later to be woven back into the polyphonic texture of interaction with other themes. Just as they do in the fugue, the themes coordinate and intersect, and very often they also diverge and create dissonance and tension. An example of a theme being prominent in the New Zealand interviews was that of travel and mobility, where around half the participants had immigrated from overseas. As an example, two of the participants moved to New Zealand for career promotions, while one of the participants moved to New Zealand because her husband had wanted to finish his career in a new setting. The two promotion candidates used the ability to emigrate from England to New Zealand as a step up in social class and academic level. Both spoke about their partners who had moved with them despite not having a job lined up before they left England nor being particularly career-focused after they arrived in New Zealand. For these two participants, value was created through their travel and mobility happening at points in their careers, which intersected with the other themes as a result of this geographical shift. The woman who emigrated because of her husband was able to create value by leveraging the prestige of her research career along with experience from a senior management post in the public sector in England to springboard into senior and high-status leadership roles upon entry in a New Zealand university.

### 1.13 | Moments and serendipity

The final concept to emerge from the fugue is that of “moments and serendipity.” The artistic drama of the fugue is created through the tonal and harmonic tension that occurs with the convergence and divergence of the intersecting themes. The fugue has a quicksilver quality, where intertwining themes and single themes can alter the character of the piece of music from, for instance, melancholy to jaunty, or tranquil to turbulent. Alterations of form and feeling happen as seemingly serendipitous moments that incorporate differences in tempo and dynamics so that the listener could be forgiven for being somewhat flummoxed by the complexity of the sound they are encountering. We found these affective musical qualities translated well into a concept for our methodology because each woman's narrative involved these “moments” when a coordination of the themes directly impacted on the direction and momentum of their careers. When analyzing our material we were able to identify one or a series of key moments that seemed to have long-lasting ripple effects alongside a quickened propulsion in academic value in the shorter term. Often the women recognized these key moments, whether they were awards or academic promotion, or something subtler such as an intervention and support from a mentor. For instance, one of our New Zealand participants spoke about a casual remark from her Head of School telling her she should apply for the newly created position of professor in her department. Although she envisaged seeking a professorship at some point, she describes how the possibility at that moment had not even existed as a thought. The Head of School's endorsement opened up a new horizon of possibility she could not have predicted or seen coming in advance. Serendipity of course is not predicted, and sometimes simple good or bad luck is part of the mix. The fugue's framing of “moments and serendipity,” however, provides some order in analyzing random events and happenings because of the limits of the musical form and the elusive quality of the musical affect, which has paradoxically arisen through careful adherence to rules and compositional technique. There is, of course, an element of chaos in all academic careers. By turning to the facets of the fugue, we harness the *musical* quality of the intangible and unpredictable ‘moments’ that shape and contour academic lives.

In sum, we have used the musical form of the fugue to think through and demonstrate the multi-layered and textured academic lives of our participants and understand how they interact, engage, and navigate within the limits and possibilities of the ruins of the university. Through drawing on the musical concepts of “rhythms,” “polyphonic layering”; “themes”; and “moments and serendipity” that emerge from the fugue, we consider our participants to be one of multiple (human and non-human) actors at play in the university landscape. These actors

work in counterpoint with each other in ways that both constrain and enable participants' agency and the extent to which value can be created in academic lives. We consider our participants to be embodying a condition of "polyphony-in-action" wherein the women engage in, and are engaged by, a multi-layered and moveable environment that both shapes and is shaped by them. The musical qualities of the fugue provide us with a way to interpret the complex and reciprocal entanglements of our participants' academic lives. We now turn to the final concluding statements to listen more intently to the textured and multi-layered dimensions of our participants' academic lives as a form of "music in the ruins."

## 2 | CONCLUSION: THE MUSIC OF FEMINISM IN ACTION

We began this paper with the observation that we found the existing explanatory frameworks for analyzing the position of women leaders in academia to be inadequate in the context of our own material. As a result of our rethinking of how to analyze the position of women leaders in the contemporary academy, we have presented a methodology with three connected layers.

Firstly, inspired by Anna Tsing's mushrooms at the end of the world, we were drawn to an understanding of the university landscape through the notions of ruins, contamination and navigation. This involves a final blow to the grand narratives of modernity, liberalism and feminism, on which the university has been built, developed and critiqued. However, it does not necessitate pessimism or a lack of political ambition for change. Indeed, drawing on Lyotard and Gibson-Graham, we suggest in place of the fragmented grand narratives there are "small promises" to be found in the ruinous and contaminated landscape of the university. Indeed, our participants were themselves able to share with us the manner in which they navigated, survived and perhaps even thrived in highly unlikely ways.

Secondly, we turned to the complex relations of gender, class and race, through a poststructuralist reading of intersectionality. Here too, the grand narratives of capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism were in the dock, and we turned to micro-institutional contexts to explicate the ways in which the lives of our women participants played out in historically non-universifiable ways. In the gender, classed and raced stories of our interviewees we also identified how disciplinary field, travelling/mobility, institutional structures and policies, as well as gender became markers of inclusions/exclusion and boundaries/possibilities. Particular inequalities arose through the manner in which some things and people were made to matter and others were excluded from mattering in diverging contexts.

In order to explain how some women were successful in navigating, coordinating and interpreting these themes to their own advantage, while others were not, we developed a third step in our methodology that would take seriously the dynamic, textured and multi-layered nature of women's academic careers. For this, we sought inspiration from the musical form of the *fugue*. By drawing on the musical concepts of "rhythms," "polyphonic layering," "themes," and "moments and serendipity" we decentered our women participants and were able to analyze the manner in which they acted in counterpoint with an environment that both enabled and constrained them. Some were playing the fugue successfully and others were not. That is, some were able to bring all four themes of their lives together to achieve value in the contaminated university landscape, while others were not.

The point of developing this methodology is to contribute to feminist scholarship on the vexed question of why there are persistent gender inequalities in universities. There has been a vast accumulation of research over several decades that substantiates the point that women are not doing well. Similarly there is a long history of equality programs attempting to improve women's gendered and raced positions in academia. Even where these have achieved positive outcomes, they have been very slow and often short-term gains have not been anchored institutionally or in leadership priorities in the long term. In acknowledging these inequalities, we turned our attention to why the inequities have persisted and how those few women who have achieved leadership, have negotiated the university terrain and managed to create value. The conceptual coordinates and strategy for knowledge we have

developed has allowed us to see how some women were successful at playing the fugue and how they created a successful intersection between the ways they reshaped their discipline, used mobility to good effect, thought through their gendered relations and identities, and found moments of opportunity in university policies and structures. In some instances, they reproduced existing structures and inequalities in the university. This echoed the dominant finding in the research literature that women in leadership are complicit in reinforcing neoliberal inequalities (Blackmore & Sachs, 2012). But our methodology also allowed us to see how some women, when they moved into positions of leadership, used their reflexive and critical capacities (Hyatt, Shear and Wright 2015) to identify and act on spaces of hope and make a difference not only for themselves, but for others, by changing the university landscape. We hope readers will be inspired, as we were, by these instances where women dislodged the feeling of inevitability about the current state of the university. They not only serendipitously latched onto opportunities offering “small promises”, but reflexively used their own research and analysis of their gendered positions within the landscape of the university to engage in seriously thought through programs for change. These few women had an expansive and generous view of what academia could entail. This is a position that stands at a tangent to the masculinist ideal academic as a highly isolated individual. This is the music of feminism in action.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflict of interest to be reported.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Anonymized data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms and institutional and personal details are kept sparse so as to preserve anonymity.

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