

# Fire inside me – Exploring the possibilities of embodied queer listening

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, I develop the methodological approach of *embodied queer listening*, which allows capturing, analyzing, and writing with/through/about the researcher's embodied experience as part of the research process in interview-based studies. The approach combines anti-narrative research with embodied and queer listening to enable researchers to engage critically with normative narratives shared in interview situations and listen to their own embodied experiences that are otherwise suppressed in normative discourse. *Embodied queer listening* enables careful reflection of the researcher's positionality and power relation vis-à-vis the research participants and recognizes embodied experience as a source of knowledge that can guide further conceptualization and theorization in organizational research. Homing in on Black feminist standpoint epistemologies and the importance of 'Outsiders Within' who create knowledge 'from the margin', it contributes to epistemological discussions on the relationship between knowledge production and gendered and racialized power structures in organization studies.

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## Fire inside

Fire  
Inside me  
Roaring  
Shifting  
Dark red  
Yellow  
Hot  
Wild  
Inside me but  
Tamed  
Contained  
Inside (me)

Trying

Outside  
There is you  
Talking  
Crying  
Speaking  
To convince me  
Of your story?  
To change things?  
Or keep things unchanged.

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## Introduction

I wrote the above words in my interview logbook after conducting an interview with a white, cis, male professor who shared that he felt attacked by students of color who had called out his racist behavior in a class he taught. I wrote it to express the embodied experience of doing research on harassment and discrimination as a young, bisexual, cis, female scholar of color in a structurally heterosexist and racist academic system. I knew *that* my embodied experience in this moment – the anger but also confusion I felt at his racist microaggressions – mattered, but at that point, I did not know *how* to make it matter for my research. This article describes both the process and outcome of developing a methodological approach that allows capturing the researcher's embodied experience as part of the research process and making it a legitimate source of knowledge. The approach highlights that it is important to affectively tune into the embodied experience of oneself as the researcher, not to understand the interviewee better, or to reveal the interviewees' insights 'through the researcher', but rather to capture and utilize the researcher's embodied experience as a basis for investigating and theorizing problems that otherwise remain invisible or unspeakable. The methodological approach developed in this article is called *embodied queer listening*.

Much feminist research has at its core been engaged in 'healing unnecessary divisions' between body and mind, sensing and thinking, feeling and knowing (Lorde 1984, 9). As part of this effort, scholars have fought for legitimizing lived and embodied experience as an accepted form of knowledge, most prominently so within Black feminist and postcolonial scholarship (Christian 1987; Collins 2009; Essed 1991; Lorde 1984; Mohanty 2003). As argued within Black feminist standpoint epistemologies, this is essential as it allows including and foregrounding marginalized perspectives in knowledge production as perspectives that reveal in an embodied and affective way what power hierarchies exist and how they affect lives both 'at the margin' and 'at the center' (Collins 1999; Dorion 2021a, 2021b; hooks 2000). Nonetheless, the practical experience of engaging in embodied research, especially as a marginalized scholar, can feel overwhelming. It can be difficult to trust your own embodied experience and constantly fight the internalized thoughts that this research is 'too much about yourself' if it resonated with you so strongly, that you are too absorbed or too involved, that this embodied and affective engagement with your data inhibits your understanding, your clear sight (cf. Harris 2021; Pasque et al. 2012).

In the case of my research – investigating the intersections of racist and heterosexist harassment and discrimination in Danish universities as a young, bisexual, cis, female scholar of color – I repeatedly struggled with these doubts and insecurities. For example, when interviewing university faculty, many would acknowledge sexist harassment and gendered discrimination to be important issues while problems of racist discrimination, including intersectional understandings of racialized forms of sexual harassment, were hardly ever mentioned. Still, I could feel – in every part of my body, in every pore of my skin – that in many interview situations, there was a clearly sensible tension when I tried to speak of racism and racist discrimination. These tensions were noticeable most strongly by tuning into the embodied and affective elements of the interview situations; that is, listening to my own embodied experience made it possible to capture those forms of harassment and discrimination that deviated from normative expressions. Yet, I struggled finding a methodological approach that allowed me to seriously and carefully take into account the embodied experience that is part of my interview-based research.

Both the epistemological need and practical difficulties of challenging the body–mind–binary and related epistemic exclusions have been discussed in organization studies (Ashcraft 2017; 2018; Fotaki and Harding 2018; Phillips, Pullen, and Rhodes 2014; Thanem and Knights 2019). Organizational ethnographies have been used to include marginalized perspectives through researching and writing from and about lived, embodied experience, for instance in feminist activist ethnographies (Deschner and Dorion 2020), affective ethnographies (Holck 2018), or embodied autoethnographies (Boncori and Smith 2019; Johansson and Jones 2019; Satama and Huopalainen 2019). The realm

of 'writing differently' has moreover provided an important impetus to develop practices of writing/doing research in a way that refrains from privileging (seemingly) rational, orderly, and disembodied text, to the benefit of writing with/through/about emotions, embodiment, fluidity, and messiness (Pérezts 2022; Phillips, Pullen, and Rhodes 2014; Pullen 2018; Pullen and Rhodes 2015; Vachhani 2019).

Yet, while (auto)ethnographic research and 'writing differently' have become spaces for engaging with organization researchers' emotions and embodied experience, attention to this remains scarce in interview-based research. In interviews, it is commonly the interlocutor (not the researcher) who is understood as (potentially) speaking from a marginalized, othered position, wherefore engagement with their embodied, lived experience is to be facilitated by the researcher (Helin 2013; Thanem and Knights 2019). In the case of my study, however, it is me – the researcher/interviewer – who is speaking 'from the margin' (hooks 2000), from the position of the 'Outsider Within' (Collins 1999), struggling to acknowledge and analytically utilize my own embodied experience – not to dismiss the relational character of the interview situation but to relate to it from a different positionality. Thus derived the need to explore and develop a methodological approach for integrating my embodied experience into my study; a way to put Black feminist standpoint epistemologies into practice in interview-based organizational research. The following question guides this exploration:

What methodological approach to data generation, analysis, and writing allows capturing the researcher's embodied experience as part of the interview encounter so that this embodied experience can function as a source of knowledge?

Engaging with this question, I combine embodied (Gill 2012) and queer listening (Landreau 2012) to develop what I term *embodied queer listening*. *Embodied queer listening* enables researchers to tune into their own embodied experience in the research process to engage critically with normative narratives shared in interview situations and make space for listening to embodied experiences that are otherwise ignored and suppressed in normative discourse. As part of this, it enables a careful reflection and consideration of the researcher's positionality and power relation vis-à-vis the research participants in the temporal, spatial, and emotional context of their encounter. *Embodied queer listening* thus offers a practice of data generation, analysis, and writing through embodied experience, with the aim to acknowledge and contribute to establishing embodied experience as a legitimate source of knowledge that guides further conceptualization and theorization. This is relevant not only for strengthening research on racism and racist discrimination in organizations (Bell et al. 2021; Cole and Grace 2020; Dar et al. 2021; Nkomo 2021), but more generally, for research that aims to highlight those perspectives that deviate from what is normatively accepted and expected (see e.g. Christensen 2021a; Plotnikof et al. 2022; Vitry 2020 on queer forms of organizing). It further contributes to discussions on the relationship between knowledge production and gendered and racialized power structures by homing in on Black feminist standpoint epistemologies to accept and value embodied experience 'from the margin' as a legitimate source of knowledge (Collins 2009; Essed 1991; hooks 2000; Mohanty 2003).

The article is structured as follows. It starts with outlining existing perspectives on embodied research and feminist standpoint epistemologies in organization studies, positioning this article and indicating its relevance in the field. Thereafter follows the development of the methodological approach of *embodied queer listening*, which is the article's primary focus and its main contribution. To illustrate the possibilities of the methodological approach of *embodied queer listening*, I draw upon my empirical research on racist workplace harassment and discrimination at Danish universities, showcasing how the approach of *embodied queer listening* can be employed in research practice and what insights it may generate. The article ends with an outline of the contributions the approach of *embodied queer listening* offers for organizational research.

## Embodied research and feminist standpoint epistemologies in organization studies

Feminist research has long advocated for forms of knowledge creation that go beyond dominant notions of generating written- or spoken-word-based text to be transcribed and coded as empirical data, and then analyzed in a 'neutral' and 'objective' way. This critique has often been based upon challenging an assumed separation between mind and body, rationality and feeling, thinking and sensing (Ashcraft 2017; 2018; Fotaki and Harding 2018; Martin 2003; Phillips, Pullen, and Rhodes 2014; Thanem and Knights 2019), arguing that this separation has led to demeaning, ignoring, and subjugating anyone 'othered' against a hetero-male-patriarchal norm of disembodied scientists, in particular women, people of color and queer persons, as well as their experience-based and embodied knowledge (Christian 1987; Collins 2009; Essed 1991; Lorde 1984; Mohanty 2003).

In contrast, feminist standpoint epistemologies acknowledge the epistemic value of lived and embodied experience. Such acknowledgment allows knowledge to be rooted in practice, attend to affect and emotions (as part of lived experience), and stem from a multiplicity of perspectives instead of favoring normative and dominant viewpoints (Dorion 2021a; Essed 1991). Feminist standpoint epistemologies thus question *who* is allowed to be a subject of knowledge production and *what* is deemed a legitimate object of study (Dorion 2021b), as well as *how* subjects from different positionalities can engage in the process of creating knowledge about different objects of study. Black feminist and postcolonial standpoint theories further emphasize the need to include and foreground marginalized perspectives so that knowledge can be created 'from the margin' (hooks 2000). That is, from a place where lived relations reveal hierarchies of power and domination because they show – in an embodied and affective way – how these hierarchies affect 'the everyday world' of those of us who are always-already attuned to both margin and center in our daily struggle for survival (hooks 2000; Mohanty 2002).

In organization studies, approaches have been developed to empower and include marginalized voices and stress the legitimacy to produce knowledge from lived, embodied experience, for instance through feminist activist ethnographies that commit to documenting and actively engaging with the lived experiences of those affected by intersectional forms of oppression (Deschner and Dorion 2020), through affective ethnographies that allow capturing emotions and affect that develop between researchers and interlocutors (Holck 2018), or through autoethnographic work that provides insights through the affective, embodied experiences of the researchers themselves (Boncori and Smith 2019; Johansson and Jones 2019; Satama and Huopalaainen 2019).

Organization scholars have moreover pushed the realms of academic writing to engage with felt and lived experience. 'Writing differently' has allowed 'exploring the different ways in which we can speak meaningfully about what we care about when we feel a need to speak about it in a way that cannot be satisfied by dominant forms of academic writing' (Guschke 2023, 118–119). From a feminist perspective, it has been paramount to use writing as a practice of opposing dominant masculine norms that privilege (seemingly) rational, orderly, and disembodied text, instead highlighting the need to write with/through/about emotions, embodiment, fluidity, and messiness (Pérezts 2022; Phillips, Pullen, and Rhodes 2014; Pullen 2018; Pullen and Rhodes 2015; Vachhani 2019). Again, it has often been in form of (auto)ethnographies that such forms of 'writing differently' have been explored (Mandalaki and Pérezts 2022; van Eck, van Amsterdam, and van Den Brink 2021; Weatherall 2018).

There has been less attention to organization researchers' own emotions and embodied experience outside the realm of conducting (auto)ethnographic research, such as in interview-based studies. Scholars have suggested practices of engaging with interviews as situated, embodied, affective, dialogic, and relational encounters (Ayata et al. 2019; Helin 2013; van Amsterdam and van Eck 2019). However, the researcher is imagined as the one engaging with and making sense of what the interlocutor says or, within embodied and affective approaches, feels (Helin 2013; Thanem and Knights 2019; van Amsterdam and van Eck 2019). The researcher's role, even if

engaging in an embodied, relational way, is thus to foreground the interlocutor's perspective – using one's own body as a tool for understanding data better, or in a different way. An approach that arguably developed in such a way also because few studies explicitly consider the position of the researcher (rather than the interlocutor) as the marginalized, othered position.

In my research, as a young, bisexual, cis woman of color in a non-tenured position in Danish academia – the very same system in which I research heterosexist and racist harassment and discrimination – what I research resonates with me personally not only as I can empathize with the experiences spoken about in my interviews. My embodied role is not only 'useful' to understand the interviewees differently. I risk experiencing the very same heterosexist and racist harassment and discrimination during the interview itself. The encounter between me as the researcher and the interviewees is not free of the gendered and racialized power relations that structure the Danish academic system. Conducting these interviews, I find myself in a position of being 'the Outsider Within' (Collins 1999) creating knowledge 'from the margin' which allows looking 'both from the outside in and from the inside out [...] and focus] attention on the center as well as on the margin [...] understand[ing] both' (hooks 2000, p. xvi). While this position is a vulnerable one, bearing the risk to experience discrimination while conducting research, it also provides the possibility to reclaim the value of embodied experience of othered and minoritized perspectives in knowledge production by centering, acknowledging, and analytically utilizing my own embodied experience. While my particular embodied positionality is one position from which these reflections of creating knowledge 'from the margin' comes to matter, similar considerations become relevant when we start to consider and methodologically explore the different and intersectional positions of marginalization and privilege between researcher and interlocutor rather than assuming that there exists a descending hierarchy from the former to the latter.

What is needed is a way to capture, analyze, and write the researcher's embodied experience in (to) the study, recognizing it as data and establishing it as a source of knowledge in organizational research. My inquiry thus develops alongside Dorion (2021b, 457) who asks: 'How to turn [my own] experience into words, into knowledge, in a feminist way?' Or put differently, what methodological approach to data generation, analysis, and writing allows capturing the researcher's embodied experience as part of the interview encounter so that this embodied experience can function as a source of knowledge? Engaging with this question led to the development of the approach of *embodied queer listening*.

## Embodied queer listening

The approach of *embodied queer listening* is overall based within a perspective of anti-narrative research (Riach, Rumens, and Tyler 2016). Anti-narrative research suggests using Butler's (2004) notions of performativity and undoing as a basis for organization research by listening to and working with the inconsistencies in narratives instead of trying to create and maintain coherent, normative stories from their accounts. It aims at paying attention to and taking seriously experiences that deviate from normative expectations, while exploring how such expectations are created and reproduced, that is scrutinizing the normative basis they are built upon as well as the performative power inherent to them. Anti-narrative research can thus be described as a norm-critical research practice (Christensen 2018; 2021b; Guschke and Christensen 2021).

*Embodied queer listening* is used to operationalize anti-narrative research in data generation, analysis, and writing, which are understood as interlinking aspects rather than separate steps in a research process. This means that *embodied queer listening* is practiced during the interviews and afterward when re-listening to the recordings and analyzing the data. It moreover influences the writing process. Arguably, how one listens influences what and how data is generated, and writing, both in the initial process of writing interview notes as well as when writing the analysis, influences what and how data is being accessed and interpreted. In Thanem and Knights's (2019, 120) words, '(s)ince writing shapes how we think about our research (... w)riting can never be an

isolated state of “writing up.” Simultaneously, the initial process of data analysis already starts in the interview situation as the interview becomes a dialogue with a particular focus on listening, rather than a classical investigative situation that centers on asking questions. Following Helin (2013) and her idea of ‘dialogic listening’, listening is an active process and embodied activity, which creates relationality in a dialogue, yet is often taken-for-granted. She argues that listening is as much a part of a dialogic moment as speaking is and that accordingly as researchers, we need to pay closer attention to how we listen. To develop an anti-narrative research approach that is attentive to listening practices, I mobilize the methodological possibilities of embodied listening (Gill 2012) and queer listening (Landreau 2012).

Gill (2012) draws on Black queer influences on ethnographic work to describe a practice of embodied listening that stresses the need to attend to both linguistically and bodily expressed accounts. For Gill (2012, 33), this derives from and foregrounds a particular situated lived experience, namely the position of ‘Black queers [...] as situated, speaking subjects.’ Gill (2012, 33) thus argues for Black queerness as an ‘epistemic location’ from which ‘variously constituted Black queer subjects come to understand themselves and the world in which they live’, which echoes Black feminist standpoint epistemologies. Part of speaking and creating knowledge from this situated subject position includes attentiveness to language *and* bodily reactions. For research, this means using one’s own body to register different aspects of what happens in a research situation. With this practice, one is better equipped to reveal and untangle situated lived experiences beyond the normative frames through which they might be told. It enables the cultivation of a ‘Black queer double vision’ which – similar to hooks’ (2000) notion of creating knowledge ‘from the margin’ and Collins’ (1999) ‘Outsider Within’ position – makes it possible ‘to look inward and outward at once’ (Gill 2012, 41). It allows hearing ‘the reverberations of race, gender, sexuality and place (at the very least) in the song of subjecthood’ (Gill 2012, 34).

Landreau (2012) draws on Ratcliffe’s (2005) concept of rhetoric listening in combination with Ahmed’s (2006) notion of queer orientation to develop queer listening as a practice that ‘allows things to remain askew, strange, unhoused, and unfamiliar’ (Landreau 2012, 156) instead of trying to ‘straighten’ them out. He describes queer listening as ‘the ability to listen with new ears to familiar voices’ (Landreau 2012, 159), putting into focus the potential to connect what is heard to different interpretative frames that go beyond normative interpretations. Connecting Ahmed’s phenomenological work with feminist standpoint theory, his proposition rests on the assertion that there is an epistemological opportunity inherent in queer orientation that allows ‘renouncing the familiar by turning (or being turned) slantwise against the straight directionality’ (Landreau 2012, 156). A queer orientation thus provides a norm-critical standpoint, or rather ‘an angle of vision’, from which normative familiarities can become visible, speakable, and potentially changeable. Queer listening thereby also allows listening for the narrative inconsistencies and breaking points that anti-narrative research aims to foreground.

Combining the approaches of embodied listening and queer listening leads to the development of what I call *embodied queer listening*, consisting of three main practices; staying in *listening mode*, listening to *bodily resistances*, and listening to *polyphony*. The interview situation is used to constantly challenge oneself to stay in *listening mode* for a bit longer than it feels comfortable or that one is used to from interview situations. The aim is to learn to endure silences after the interviewee has spoken. This mode of ‘listening into’, as Helin (2013) describes it, enables the possibility of tuning into a ‘bodily experience [of] social phenomena in a moment of pre-understanding’ (Helin 2013, 238). It allows learning something in an embodied way – from the interviewee as much as from the researcher’s own embodied reaction in that moment of silence; something which cognitively one might not understand (yet). Noting down these embodied experiences during and immediately after the interview helps put them into a cognitive frame of understanding later in the data analysis process. Yet, this first step of allowing an embodied comprehension, without ‘the need to immediately try to make sense, rationalize, or theorize’ (Helin 2013, 238) makes it possible to go beyond normatively shaped understandings of the interview situation and the generated data.

In addition, the mode of 'listening into' provides the possibility for the dialogue to develop without the interruption of a new interview question. One can listen to what else might be there. To provide an example, in my interviews, I realized that often these moments of silence open for further reflection by the interviewees in which they re-phrased what they said before and thereby opened a new perspective that deviated from the normative narrative they shared first. As we explored this further, we often realized that it was because they were afraid to voice a thought, concern, or feeling that deviated from what they perceived as a normatively accepted interpretation of or reaction to the discussed topic. As Gould (2009, 30) stresses, it is important to be able 'to observe [...] in a manner that can pick up the unspoken, the repressed, the less-than-fully conscious, the inarticulable.' Building upon Gould's work, Ayata et al. (2019, 66) further claim that listening to 'realms of silence and the unspoken' can be productive for exploring 'intense collective and personal experiences that are difficult to talk about, such as [...] disappointments, feelings of defeat, hope, loss and despair.'

*Embodied queer listening*, deriving from Landreau's (2012) work, moreover involves listening to one's own *bodily resistances* when speaking to research participants as well as when re-listening to the interview recordings. These resistances might point towards something that seemingly does not fit, revealing tensions and inconsistencies to explore further. Listening to bodily resistances acknowledges that 'that which does not fit' with the norm might feel out of place (Ahmed 2017). Yet, it allows understanding these resistances as a symptom of one's own normative expectation being broken. By focusing on the underlying norms, it is acknowledged how the norm might be exclusive, rather than the narrative that does not 'fit' being problematic. Linking *embodied queer listening* back to anti-narrative research, it allows and encourages both the telling of and the listening to those narratives that are not coherent, not 'straight'. It opens space for narratives that are complex and contradictory yet not less viable. In this sense, *embodied queer listening* is a norm-critical practice (cf. Christensen 2021b) as it challenges the normative majority to tune into queer narratives and learn how to listen to them, rather than asking those who are minoritized to tell their stories in different (more normative, more familiar) ways.

Finally, *embodied queer listening* emphasizes *polyphony* (Bakhtin 1984) by listening to 'the simultaneous interplay of voices in the field, and how these voices contribute to the multitude of possible meanings, rather than trying to combine and merge them into a single strong voice' (Helin 2013, 227). This relates to the idea of 'unfaithful' analysis and the aim to withhold judgments and categorizations as long as possible put forth by Ashcraft and Muhr (2018). Yet, it also adds the perspective of acknowledging that one person might provide different 'voices', which might all be legitimate and relevant (Helin 2013; Linell 2009). This can be practiced by consciously trying to note down not only similarities and patterns within and between interviews, but also that which is 'supplementary, different and unique' (Helin 2013, 236). This approach allows noticing and capturing those parts that deviate from the norm, even if only slightly so, and silently.

In parallel to providing a practice of engaging with data in a new way, *embodied queer listening* influences the writing process as an embodied engagement with data requires a form of embodied writing as part of the research process (cf. Thanem and Knights 2019). Particularly, I propose poetry and stories as forms of writing that allow sharing embodied knowledge and opening a space in which normative judgment is withheld as long as possible to the benefit of exploring norms and their effects rather than reproducing them. Poetry and stories have always been present as a form of intellectual work in queer and Black feminist scholarship but have been consistently delegitimized within the academy (Collins 2009; Lorde 1984). As Black lesbian poet and feminist writer Audre Lorde (1984, 36) writes about the relationship between poetry and knowledge creation:

[I]t is through poetry that we give names to those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.

From this perspective, poetry is a form of knowledge, wherefore writing poetry is *necessary* to generate thoughts, ideas, and understanding – describes by van Amsterdam and van Eck (2019) as ‘poetic inquiry’. Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (2021 [1983], 170) argues similarly when she writes about poetry as a form of ‘organic writing’ created in ‘the gut and out of living tissue’ that reveals something new: ‘A poem works [...] when the subject I started out with metamorphoses alchemically into a different one, one that has been discovered, or uncovered, by the poem.’

Poetry as an embodied and affective way of writing from lived experience is moreover essentially tied to freedom as it links to the empowering notion of speaking, writing, and creating knowledge from a marginalized standpoint, that is ‘[p]oetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand [for freedom], the implementation of that freedom’ (Lorde 1984, 38). From this perspective, writing – that is, how one writes as well as who writes (from which standpoint) – is an epistemological and political concern. It questions ‘what counts as being meaningful and what does not’ (Rhodes 2019, 28) as well as whose writing is recognized as a form of knowledge creation. When *embodied queer listening* is used as a methodological approach to data generation and analysis, it is necessary that writing in an embodied, affective, and norm-critical way is recognized as a legitimate approach to ‘scriptology’ (Rhodes 2019), whether this is through poetry, stories, or through other forms of writing yet to be explored.

## Empirical illustration

The above-outlined methodological development of *embodied queer listening* provides the main contribution of this article. To illustrate the potential the approach holds – how it can be used in research and what insights it might offer – I draw upon my empirical research on racism in the context of workplace harassment and discrimination at Danish universities.

## Study context

Denmark, as part of the Nordics, is often perceived as having achieved gender equality (Christensen and Muhr 2019; Ronen 2018; Utoft 2020) despite the persistence of problems such as workplace sexual harassment (Nordic Council of Ministers 2020) and gendered inequality in access to leadership positions (World Economic Forum 2022). Further, the idea of Danish racial exceptionalism upholds that ‘real’ issues of racialization and racism do not exist in Denmark (Danbolt 2017; Goldberg 2006; Keskinen et al. 2009; Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012), which is used to delegitimize research-based understandings of racist discrimination, demonizing anti-racist scholars as ‘polarizing and destabilizing figures’ (Danbolt and Myong 2019, 55) for calling out structural forms of racism (a threat certainly not exclusive to the Danish context, see e.g. Liu 2019). Universities provide additional contextual factors allowing discriminatory practices to persist (Castilla 2008; Dar et al. 2021; Deem 2009; Scully 2002; van den Brink and Benschop 2012) and studies have found Danish universities to be places of consistent sexist, gendered, and racist harassment and discrimination (Andreassen and Myong 2017; Guschke et al. 2019; Hvenegård-Lassen and Staunæs 2019; Skewes, Skewes, and Ryan 2019; 2021; Thorsen 2019). For this research project, I interviewed 34 individuals working at all eight Danish universities,<sup>1</sup> including PhD students, post-doctoral researchers, assistant, associate, and full professors as well as heads of departments and institute leaders, to explore the understandings of harassment and discrimination the interviewees have and what these understandings are based on.<sup>2</sup>

After each interview, I immediately noted down my initial thoughts in an interview logbook, consisting of four categories: content, atmosphere, method reflection, and personal/emotional. I used the logbook as a form of field diary in the interview process, following Ayata et al.’s (2019) suggestion to understand interviews as a process that includes not only the spoken words but also the emotional and affective interaction between interviewer and interviewee. It allowed registering, identifying, and remembering any thoughts that came up immediately after the interview while



further providing a way of capturing the embodied sensations I felt during and after the interview situation. Creating this collection of descriptions of my embodied state of being enabled me to remember and draw upon these affective insights for the analysis and throughout the writing process. Finally, it allowed me to stay reflective on my methodological approach and make sure I homed in on the intended process.

### **Working with embodied queer listening**

Working with *embodied queer listening* was insightful and generative to my research on harassment and discrimination in at least two specific ways. First, it allowed a reflexive engagement with questions of positionality and power in relation to my interviewees, reflecting my position as a young, bisexual, cis woman of color conducting research on racist and heterosexist discrimination within Danish universities. Second, it enabled me to focus not only on the discursive but also the affective level of the interviews. It made it possible to investigate the unspeakability of racism in relation to workplace harassment and discrimination at Danish universities by being attentive to embodied sensations and affective flows in the interview situation that were not necessarily mirrored in words.

#### **Part I: positionality and power**

As part of practicing *embodied queer listening*, it is paramount to reflect on the researcher's positionality and power relation vis-à-vis the research participant in the temporal, spatial, and emotional context of their encounter. Taking one example from my research, let me outline how *embodied queer listening* informs such reflection. I started this article with an outtake from my interview logbook in which I reflect my embodied experience of interviewing a white, cis, male professor who shared that he felt attacked by students of color who had called out his racist behavior in a class he taught. In these words, I relate to the part of the interview in which the interviewee kept making statements that to me, as a woman of color, felt like racist microaggressions. I could feel my body reacting to the statements, I could feel the anger building up as a hot fire roaring inside me, yet I did not openly express any of these feelings towards my interviewee. I tamed and contained my emotions, from the outside being a calm researcher listening to my interviewee who tried to, as it seemed to me, subtly convince me of his version of the story he was telling. I stayed in 'listening mode'.

At the same time, the words that I noted down after the interview reflect and facilitate another practice of *embodied queer listening*, namely listening to bodily resistances. To explore what the resistance might reveal, in order to listen to it, I had to find a way of expressing the experience and sensation I felt. This is where I find that 'traditional' forms of academic writing fail me. The line of argumentation as well as the words used commonly in academic writing fall short in expressing the kind of strong emotionality that I felt in my body in this interview situation (cf. van Amsterdam and van Eck 2019; van Eck, van Amsterdam, and van Den Brink 2021). Using different ways of writing, such as the above poetic sketches, allows pouring those feelings into words in a way that stays open to the polyphonous multitude of voices and possible meanings that are present in that moment, which can then be a basis for further reflection and analysis of the felt resistance.

Further engagement with these resistances provides a way of reflecting on one's positionality as a researcher in this field. Initial questions it triggers are for instance: What power relations are revealed at this moment, that allow the situation to unfold in the way it does, namely him speaking and me keeping quiet? Which expectations towards my positionality might the interviewee assume and thus form his narrative towards? What would my personal relation to his story be, which norms are my understandings based upon and how do these deviate from his set of normative frames? The words thus inform a reflection of my position as a researcher in this situation in relation to the interviewee. Specifically, my embodied positionality as a woman of color likely influences what the interviewee tells me as well as my interpretations of his words.

In the above case of interviewing a white, cis, male professor, it might make him more self-aware and potentially more critical of his own position and lead him to tone down some of his opinions or withhold some of his thoughts and behavior in anticipation of my reaction and his wish for social acceptance. Alternatively, it could trigger the expression of more radical views prompted by a perception of me holding anti-sexist, anti-racist views, and a related sense of having to convince me of his perspectives. While the prior assumes that I hold a powerful position as the researcher toward the interviewee and accordingly his desire to gain acceptance from me, the latter supposes that his position as a white, cis, male professor towards a younger scholar who is also a cis woman of color places power within his position as the one who wants to shape the dominant and acceptable perspective.

Utilizing *embodied queer listening* as part of reflecting on the interview situation allows going beyond such speculation. It enables me to move towards an interpretation of what the interview situation reveals about our positionalities and the power relations that unfold between us. By tuning into those moments that feel confrontational in my body, I approach an analysis of what he is trying to achieve at this moment: To convince me, of his story? To change how I perceive things to be, of what is right and wrong? Or, as I come to realize, to leave things unchanged, that is, to continuously re-establish and stabilize the normative power structures as they are, here namely giving him definition power over what counts as racist behavior and what does not while the students who accused him can be dismissed as overreacting and inappropriately aggressive. His need to 'convince' me is driven by the idea that I, as a woman of color, am already deviating from (his) norms, and must be 'convinced' back into them. The *embodied queer listening* approach thus allows me to utilize my embodied positionality and lived experience as a woman of color to recognize and capture the racism that is reproduced in this situation, namely how a white, cis, male professor declares racism not to exist, making it – as will be discussed next – unspeakable.

### **Part II: the unspeakability of racism**

Next to creating a leverage point for reflecting on positionality and power relations in the interview situation, *embodied queer listening* facilitates analytical insights. This analytical potential can be seen in the example of investigating the role of racism, including intersectional forms of racialized sexual harassment, at Danish universities. When I started my research, I set off to explore harassment and discrimination from an intersectional perspective. The aim was to pay attention to the intersecting categories emerging in my data, with the hope of being able to grasp more than 'just' gendered forms of harassment and discrimination understood as one-dimensional. Nonetheless, an analysis of the interview data, the spoken utterances and dialogues from and with interviewees, pointed primarily towards an understanding of harassment as gendered and sexualized from a heteronormative perspective. Discursively, the interviewees predominantly referred to sexual harassment and gendered discrimination.

Other forms of harassment do, however, show up in my research, revealed through *embodied queer listening*. Both during the interviews as well as when working with the recordings, I listened to the corporeal and emotional or affective (re)actions in my body. This embodied work allows for my embodied affectedness to become data, too. It enables me to turn towards that which has escaped words and discourse. Race, ethnicity, culture, religion, and language, for instance, were sometimes evoked discursively, hinting at racist discrimination but hardly ever naming it as such. Yet, while racism remained a side notion in discussions, it was affectively present intensely in many interview situations. The following three vignettes describe interviews in which such affective presence became sensible. I use the form of vignettes as a form of storytelling that allows the affective state of my own body as well as the atmosphere in the interview situation to become part of the writing.

1. *'I think people in Denmark are generally a bit more insensitive', she starts, then hesitating for a moment. It seems like she is thinking about how to explain what she means by this statement. Still hesitant, she continues: 'I have a new boyfriend. He is not from Denmark. And his religious background is also different than mine.'* Notably, she is not saying where he is from or what his religion is. What she stresses is what he is not – not Danish, not of her religion – not same, but different. As she moves on, she stumbles upon some of her words: *'And I've – I've – I've experienced some persons that I thought were very socially aware and very aware of the ...'* She pauses, thinks, *'... the way they influence other people, who have said really derogatory things about his ethnic background.'* She seems somewhat shocked about this experience, the realization that these people who were 'socially aware' said derogatory things towards him. Interestingly, she now also refers to his ethnicity while before it was his nationality and religion. I notice how, again, nationality-ethnicity-religion seem to be used as a complex entanglement rather than separate identity categories. *'I think in Denmark, there are certain ethnic groups that we are very aware of not to offend. No one is saying anything derogatory about white people – but that is I guess just how it is. But then it's more okay to say rubbish or things about certain groups rather than others and certain religious backgrounds as well.'* She speaks as if she is carefully moving from one sentence to the next, struggling for words, not quite sure how to best express what she wants to say. Her descriptions stay vague: *'certain groups'* and *'other groups'*. Whiteness is named. Which makes me wonder, am I right to assume that those 'certain groups' are not white? *'It's like a whole new world for me',* she continues: *'because I am seeing things – I am becoming aware because of my boyfriend's background. I am all of the sudden like: "What on earth? Why is this okay?"'* She seems angry, agitated but also just very surprised and confused about how this can be possible. I can almost feel that for her, in these moments, it hurts to become aware. And it also seems to confuse her to not understand why people, especially people who are 'socially aware', act this way. When she continues speaking, she urgently seems to look for an explanation. She speaks faster now: *'Maybe it's just because they have not been outside of white Scandinavia a lot.'* I have come across this assumption before and its inadequacy makes me angry every time: the idea that in Scandinavia everyone is white, how thus would one even come across someone who is not and learn how to engage with 'the non-white Other'? *'Maybe they don't understand how it affects people. And maybe, maybe ...'* Her voice is getting lower and lower as she speaks, she slows down but then after hesitating says very fast: *'... maybe they are just racist – but I wouldn't know.'* The word racist is rushed over, and the statement immediately weakened by adding insecurity and doubt – *'I wouldn't know.'* Despite her bafflement and shock at the experience, calling this behavior out as racist seems unspeakable. (A6)
2. *With an institute leader I am discussing how plans to deal with harassment are implemented at different levels of the university. She describes how part of the implantation is to discuss the topic of workplace harassment at each institute once per year. I ask her what the general reactions towards these discussions are. How do people at the faculty react to having to discuss workplace harassment? She laughs a little and says: 'Positively I would say. Of course, there has been irony and laughter and "do we need this?"'. That she herself is laughing, laughing along with those who react with jokes and irony, feels a bit uncomfortable. I become the one who is making this a serious topic, while she seems to be saying, it is alright to laugh about it – it is a laughable matter to some degree. She then continues: 'It's also funny that you are brown and not blue-eyed, you know?' I am baffled. It feels extremely uncomfortable, for a moment the atmosphere is tense. Her comment lingers in the air like an unanswered question. She said it as if to explain why it is, indeed, funny. But how is it funny that I am brown and not blue-eyed, in other words not white? What is fun about it? Now it is up to me to either laugh along with her or to become the troublemaker, the one who does not get the joke and the one who makes it about herself and her identity, when in fact the same interviewee has earlier in the interview made it very clear that 'it is not about identities. It's not about you. [...] Identity politics is a no go in academic settings.'* So, here I am, not laughing along, but also not saying anything. Race in form of the color of my skin – or rather the color it is not – is very present in the room, for a moment the atmosphere is so dense you could cut it. Then we move

on, but the mood has shifted ever so slightly afterwards. And yet, race, racialization, or racism are not talked about in this interview. (A27)

3. I am interviewing a head of department and ask him about any problems or challenges at his department that might relate to gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or any related category. 'I think actually the only aspect of that, that really plays a role is probably gender', he replies. The only one that really plays a role. I get curious if any of the other aspects might not really but still somehow play a role. But to the contrary, he states: 'The other things, I don't think we think too much about that.' How easily not thinking about something can remove it from the list of problems, I think. He seems to be somewhat insecure about how to best address 'the other things.' He stammers slightly as he moves on: 'The other things ... We we we we we have – we have.' He struggles for words. 'We do not have a very strong concentration on any sort of nationalities, or we are a very internationalized department.' He smiles now. He seems almost relieved over having found a good way to address this topic. Suddenly we are not talking about harassment based on ethnicity or religion anymore, but about an international workplace which seems to be a much more pleasant topic. 'Maybe the Danes are still the biggest group, but it's surely challenged by the Germans and the Italians.' Now he even laughs a little, this seems to become a joyful conversation for him while I feel annoyance and anger rising. He even shares what he perceives as a funny anecdote: 'There was a long discussion about what we should call the department – this is a funny department. And then I was saying at one meeting, maybe we should just call us the Department of Danes, Italians, and Germans.' He seems to warm up to the topic and continues proudly: 'Now actually we have hired two Portuguese-speaking. That means that we are in total four Portuguese. So, we have a lot of nationalities. And I think the majority of the Danes like this international atmosphere at the department.' It feels like this has turned into a happy story of happy international people that also make the Danes happy – except that I do not feel happy. I feel uneasy about the fact that ethnicity and sexuality, the two categories I had initially asked about, seem to have completely disappeared out of view. He destroys any remaining hopes about them re-entering the conversation by ending with: 'But other things – ethnicity, sexual preferences and so on – that's not something we look at, at all. That's not really a variable for people. As long as they're good, we're happy.' (A30)

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Working with *embodied queer listening* and capturing the insights it generates through writing embodied vignettes allows exploring how the categories of race-ethnicity-culture-religion-language are evoked not only discursively but how they resonate affectively. Using the practice of staying in 'listening mode' to sense embodied resistances and recognizing the polyphony of meanings that go beyond normative interpretations reveals how expressions of racism in the Danish context reverberate affectively within, between, and beyond the words spoken in the interview. In one situation a non-white 'Other' is created against a norm of whiteness in Scandinavia. Here, religion and ethnicity intersect in the creation of the seemingly non-white, potentially Muslim, or at least not Christian person as deviant. And despite the anger which evokes a strong affective reaction to this differentiation, it is not named racist discrimination. In another instance, brown skin color gets opposed to blue eyes evoking an idea of whiteness as an unspoken norm in the discussion of workplace harassment in a Danish context. The third vignette briefly mentions ethnicity, but just to dismiss it immediately as not relevant. The category of ethnicity, the interviewee argues, does not matter 'as long as they are good, we are happy' and do not care, revealing the meritocratic belief that if you do not fit in, that is, if you are not 'good', it is your own fault and what is more, you become responsible for ruining the department's happiness (cf. Ahmed 2014b; 2014a).

Noticeably, that which is assumed as normative is hardly ever named explicitly. Simultaneously, bodies that alternate from the norm – if they are evoked – are othered. Even when I actively tried to speak about these non-normative bodies, they were removed from the conversation immediately, or rather never explicitly allowed in. Thinking with Ahmed's (2006) notion of normatively shaped orientations and using the above insights derived from the practice of *embodied queer listening* as

analytical starting points leads me to suggest that Danish academia is orientated towards white, Danish, Western, non-Muslim, heterosexual, cis bodies. That is, when we speak about issues within academia, those issues are understood in relation – or rather, in proximity – to a normatively white, Danish, Western, non-Muslim, heterosexual cis body in academia. The ‘further away’ one is positioned from the orienting norm, the harder it is to get into view (see Guschke 2023 for a more detailed analysis). Consequently, when harassment is discussed as *sexual* harassment and *cis women* are understood as the ones being harassed, the orientation remains towards and thus in proximity to whiteness, Danish-ness, being Western, not being Muslim, speaking Danish, and cis-heteronormativity. It is assumed that the woman who is harassed is a white Danish heterosexual cis woman. Issues of racism or anti-queerness are not even considered as potential factors – ‘that’s not something we look at, at all’. The exclusion of non-white, non-Danish, Muslim, queer bodies is not named and often not even recognized as a possibility. If anything, they are positioned as that which deviates, as those bodies that break the norm, as different. The non-white, non-Danish, Muslim, queer person remains invisible and silenced – even when exclusions through discrimination and harassment come into focus.

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**Some things become unspeakable,**

*so far outside the norm of who is part of ----- a university,  
not recognized as possibly being excluded.*

*Invisible and silenced,*

*even when ...*

*even when ...*

*even when ...*

*(some)*

*inequalities are addressed.*

*(Guschke 2023, 224)*

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The linkage of harassment to sexual harassment thus sustains the silencing of other forms of harassment persisting at workplaces in Danish universities. One might even go so far to argue that making visible sexual and gender harassment currently comes at the cost of continuing to obscure other forms of harassment and discrimination, such as racist discrimination, taking place at workplaces in Danish universities. At least, it would be detrimental to assume that a lack of acknowledgment of these problems can be translated as the problem being nonexistent (cf. Andreassen and Myong 2017; Hvenegård-Lassen and Staunæs 2019; Thorsen 2019). Instead, the current way in which harassment is discussed leads to racist forms of harassment continuously being silenced and ignored, that is, racism becomes unspeakable. It is therefore important to analyze how problems such as racism are recurrently left out of the debate as making these silences visible allows conceptualizing their unspeakability. Utilizing *embodied queer listening* as an approach to data generation, analysis and writing – a practice that enables a ‘queer orientation’ in interviews and thereby reveals these norms and resultant exclusions – provides a valuable starting point for such analyses.

## Concluding discussion

In this article, I offered the development of a methodological approach I term *embodied queer listening*. The approach was developed based on a need to capture, analyze, and write the researcher’s embodied experience in(to) an interview-based study, recognizing it as data and establishing it as a legitimate source of knowledge. The approach is based on anti-narrative research (Riach, Rumens, and Tyler 2016) and combines embodied listening (Gill 2012) with queer listening (Landreau 2012) with the aim to enable researchers to engage critically with normative narratives shared in interview situations and make space for listening to their own embodied experiences that are otherwise ignored and suppressed in normative discourse. As part of this, *embodied queer listening* enables a careful reflection and consideration of the researcher’s positionality and power relation vis-à-vis the research participants in the temporal, spatial, and emotional context

of their encounter. *Embodied queer listening* acknowledges and establishes embodied experience, particularly from different marginalized positionalities, as data and as a source of knowledge so that it can guide further conceptualization and theorization.

The article offers three interconnected contributions. First, it provides a method for researching and writing perspectives in organizations that are deviant from normative discourse, second, it adds to epistemological discussions on the relation between knowledge production and gendered and racialized power structures in relation to feminist standpoint epistemologies in organization studies, and third, it extends our thinking about embodied organizational research and writing from a norm-critical perspective.

As the empirical example of this study showed, using *embodied queer listening* as a method for doing and writing research can be of great importance for research on racism and racist discrimination in organizations, the existence of which often remains ignored, and in-depth investigations, therefore, remain scarce (Bell et al. 2021; Cole and Grace 2020; Dar et al. 2021; Nkomo 2021). In this particular case, the use of *embodied queer listening* made it possible to explore the racism that permeates workplaces at Danish universities despite the problem of racism rarely being explicitly acknowledged or put into words by the interviewees. Furthermore, it allowed conceptualizing racism as unspeakable, that is, not only to reveal that it is not spoken about but to establish an analytically based argument that not speaking of racism – its unspeakability – is part of reproducing it within the university system. Writing through poetry and stories as part of *embodied queer listening* practices allowed integrating the embodied knowledge that derives from this approach, establishing it as part of knowledge creation. *Embodied queer listening* can thus provide the groundwork for important further theorization and conceptualization, taking its basis in perspectives and forms of expression that are deviant from normative discourse, and marginalized in dominant forms of knowledge production. Next to racism research this is of relevance, for instance, when investigating queer forms of organizing (Christensen 2021a; Plotnikof et al. 2022; Vitry 2020) which might only become recognizable when we know how to listen for them.

Establishing *embodied queer listening* as an approach to doing and writing research in organization studies contributes to epistemological discussions on the relation between knowledge production and gendered and racialized power structures. Speaking to scholars working from marginalized, othered positions, it offers an approach of how it can become possible to center, acknowledge, and analytically utilize our embodied, lived experience when we conduct research as ‘Outsiders Within’ (Collins 1999), attuned to ‘the margin’ and the center (hooks 2000). It might help us to sense, think, feel, and know all at the same time, and demand for the knowledge deriving from our lived experience to be taken seriously – a potentially radical act considering how easily our emotions and embodied experiences are dismissed by calling us ‘angry Black women’ or ‘feminist killjoys’ (Ahmed 2014a; 2017; hooks 2000; Lorde 1984). Addressing the organization studies community more broadly, *embodied queer listening* challenges us to think more carefully about our own embodied positions of marginalization and privilege vis-à-vis our study participants and how our embodied experience may influence both the study process and analytical insights – important examples of such careful reflection and creative ways of approaching this challenge in organization studies may be found in van Amsterdam and van Eck (2019) and van Eck, van Amsterdam, and van Den Brink (2021). It moreover demands to home in on Black feminist standpoint epistemologies to accept and value embodied experience created ‘at the margin’ as a legitimate source of knowledge that does not need to be tested against a (white, cis, male, Western) dominant norm of acceptable knowledge (Collins 2009; Essed 1991; hooks 2000; Mohanty 2003). This has been called for within organization studies, for instance from feminist and postcolonial perspectives (Alcadipani et al. 2012; Dorion 2021a; 2021b), yet practical approaches and spaces to explore doing and writing research from such epistemological standpoints remain scarce (Bell et al. 2021; Dar et al. 2021).

Finally, the theoretical conjunction of anti-narrative research as an approach to exploring and challenging the reproduction of norms and their performative power (Butler 2004; Riach, Rumens, and Tyler 2016), queer listening as a practice of queer orientation (Ahmed 2006; Landreau 2012),

and embodied listening as a way to foreground the epistemic value within marginalized, situated, lived experience (Gill 2012; hooks 2000) allows for the approach of *embodied queer listening* to extend our thinking about embodied research and embodied writing. It contributes a methodological approach for embodied organizational research that aims to work critically with the normativity of dominant narratives shared in research situations (Ashcraft and Muhr 2018; Christensen 2018; 2021b; Holck and Muhr 2017; Riach, Rumens, and Tyler 2016). That is, it combines norm-critical (Christensen 2021b; Guschke and Christensen 2021; Plotnikof et al. 2022) and embodied research approaches (Jääskeläinen and Helin 2021; Mandalaki and Pérezts 2022; Thanem and Knights 2019), extending them into each other by acknowledging the radical, norm-critical potential of embodied research conducted ‘at the margin’ while recognizing embodied, lived experience as an important basis of norm-critique. Embodied writing as part of *embodied queer listening* thereby becomes a ‘political and ethical mobilization [...] to change the terms that we are given – to rupture the epistemic containment that continually oppresses’ (Pullen 2018, 129). Making space for embodied writing in organization studies thus means making space for embodied knowledge created ‘at the margin’, space for an epistemological and political struggle for freedom.

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#### **Embodied writing**

*as part of embodied queer listening  
a ‘revolutionary demand’  
to implement our freedom  
(Lorde 1984, 38);*

*the very act  
of survival  
(Anzaldúa 2021 [1983]);*

*releasing  
the fire inside.*

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## **Notes**

1. Aalborg University (AAU), Aarhus University (AU), Copenhagen Business School (CBS), Technical University of Denmark (DTU), IT-University (ITU), University of Copenhagen (KU), Roskilde University (RUC) and University of Southern Denmark (SDU).
2. It was no precondition to have own experiences with harassing or discriminatory behavior but I asked about occurrences of harassment and discrimination in the interviewees’ workplaces, no matter if they were involved as victims/survivors, perpetrators, or bystanders.

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