

# The Paradox of Inclusion: Non-Binary Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Work in a Dualistic World

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## Abstract

Despite decades of policy and programming, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives remain constrained by the binary logic embedded in traditional organisational thinking. This paper critiques the positivist and dualistic assumptions that shape the environments in which EDI practitioners operate. We argue that modernist frameworks oversimplify complex social realities, obscure systemic harm and trauma, and reinforce hierarchical structures rooted in coloniality and white supremacy.

Drawing on social constructionism – particularly Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony – we propose that a paradigmatic shift toward non-binary, relational, and polyvocal approaches to organising is essential if we are to disrupt entrenched ways of thinking and the socially constructed patterns of hierarchical othering they normalise.

Through reflexive discussion of our thoughts, experiences, complicities, and biases, we explore how polyphonic organising, grounded in a pedagogy of love, offers a pragmatic framework for cultivating inclusive, dynamic, and ethically responsive human systems. We contend that the efficacy of EDI programming will remain limited unless organisations move beyond their colonial, neoliberal, and binary legacy. In an era of rising anti-EDI sentiment, we offer this paper as a reflexive, visceral, and hopeful response to the so-called culture wars – and the urgent need for systemic transformation.

## Citation Link

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As equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) practitioners working predominantly in non-profit organisations, we navigate the complexities of introducing non-binary practices in systems built upon the colonial logic of a binary ontology daily. This paper is our reflections on the affective, emotional and moral challenges of co-creating change in such a paradoxical context. Through our lived experiences and open discussions of our philosophical leanings, we seek to evocatively illuminate – through narrative and poetry – the tensions of working within managerial systems

where inherited binary discourse continues to act as an invisible and unconscious barrier to co-creating more inclusive ways of relating and being.

In what feels like perilous times for those working toward a more equitable, prosocial world, we turn to theories of polyphony and the pedagogy of love as sources of comfort and hope. In co-writing this piece, our aim is to offer support and encouragement, advance praxis, and foster a sense of collective perseverance among practitioners who identify with our struggles.

I came to theory because I was hurting... I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing

(hooks, 1991, p. 1)

## Introduction

EDI programmes aim to cultivate organisational cultures that ensure fair treatment and full participation for their members, particularly those from historically underrepresented or marginalised groups.

However, despite decades of work and legislative advancements, systemic change remains elusive. We posit that the ongoing reliance on legacy binary thinking in organisational discourse, policies, systems and decision-making processes may be causing this sense of “stuckness”.

A binary mindset tends to reduce complex social realities into rigid categories, thereby reinforcing existing hierarchies and exclusionary structures. The resulting inequities produce forms of harm – both material and embodied – that are often not apparent in Human Resource Management (HRM) reporting and metrics because this is a disembodied and reductive form of knowledge production (Jack, Greenwood, and Schapper, 2012; Newman et al., 2023). Harm is enacted through the somatic impact of marginalisation, understood through concepts such as status syndrome (Marmot, 2004) and slow violence (Nixon, 2007). Moreover, binary logic is inextricably enmeshed with coloniality and white supremacy, an assemblage that mobilises ideologies, affect, and practices designed to create disposable lives.

As EDI practitioners, we are viscerally, professionally, and spiritually troubled by our unavoidable complicity in systems of harm. In response, we seek to contribute to transformation work by exploring the consequences of binary logic for EDI practitioners and presenting a case for making a paradigm shift to non-binary, relational, and polyphonic approaches to organising.

## Consequences of the Anti-Woke Movement

I want to apprentice to connectivity, permeability, teeming dirt/I want skills against taxonomy...

(Aphramor, 2023)

Regulatory approaches to EDI have favoured situational and rhetorical shifts that stop short of, and even impede, the project’s aspirational goals for transformation. This impasse feels ominously entwined with the political shift towards conservatism in the United States which seems to be happening in tandem with a rise in the anti-woke movement. The increasingly polarised landscape

could be seen as the unintended, yet predictable, consequence of EDI (and other) practices that, rooted in binary logic, inherently construct ideological antagonists as immutable adversaries rather than as co-participants in social progress or by holding space for any other relational configurations.

At the time of writing, the Trump Administration is capriciously targeting EDI initiatives, framing them as divisive or as forms of "reverse discrimination". This has led to policy changes at state and federal levels, restricting corporate EDI training, banning diversity programmes in universities, and challenging the use of affirmative action. These developments not only undermine decades of progress but also create an environment of fear and reluctance among organisations that previously championed such efforts (Reich, Martin, and Frazier, 2024). This rolling back of EDI work, often justified by arguments against "woke ideology," ignores the structural inequities these programmes were designed to address. Organisations have begun scaling back their diversity efforts due to legal risks and financial concerns. The Supreme Court's 2023 decision to strike down affirmative action in college admissions has emboldened critics to push for similar rollbacks in the private sector. Consequently, EDI work is viewed as party-political, making it increasingly difficult to advance social equity policies.

As the old saying goes, when America sneezes, the rest of the world catches a cold. In Europe, populist movements – often inspired by developments in the United States – are resisting equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) programmes, portraying these as threats to meritocracy or as forms of reverse discrimination. Such critics often characterise EDI efforts as merely exercises in political correctness, thereby trivialising the structural inequities these initiatives seek to address.

We have also been dismayed to learn about the United Kingdom's Supreme Court's judgment in *For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers*, that "sex", as it relates to the Equality Act 2010, means biological sex. In our view, this is a regressive development which threatens the dignity and safety of trans people; the implications are already being felt. For example, at the time of writing:

- The British Transport Police has announced that transgender women detainees will now be searched by male officers (Syal, R, 2025).
- The English Football Association has banned transgender women from women's football (Communications Department, Football Association, 2025).
- The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has issued an interim ruling that "trans women (biological men) should not be permitted to use the women's facilities and trans men (biological women) should not be permitted to use the men's facilities, as this will mean that they are no longer single-sex facilities and must be open to all users of the opposite sex (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2025).

As we finalise this article (27 March 2025), a sense of foreboding and jeopardy looms large. The authors – all of whom have a connection with the organisation known as the Religious Society of Friends, a faith group who have won a Nobel Peace Prize for its work (Gunnar, 2025) – have just learned that 20 British police officers had forcibly entered the Westminster Quaker Meeting House in London and arrested six young people who had gathered to discuss concerns about climate change and the crisis in Gaza. In response, the Recording Clerk of the Quakers stated: "This aggressive violation of our place of worship and the forceful removal of young people holding a protest group meeting clearly shows what happens when a society criminalises protest" (Parker, 2025). It appears that being identified as 'woke' on certain issues now carries the risk of criminalisation.

Accordingly, EDI practitioners must move beyond programmatic approaches to develop compelling, nuanced narratives that expose the limitations of binary systems and discourse (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992).

### **EDI Work as a Challenge to Binary Organisational Thinking**

I am so over the patriarchy's invention of gender and all that engenders - school shootings, misogyny, male suicides, cis panic and hence trans death... the desperate drive for static categories... the need to feel superior to greet difference with condescension all of the urges to hurt that terrible entitlement striving to impose dominion over conversation, gender, and Nature - Nature! As if humans were separate from trees, krill, coal, the breeze..."

(Aphramor, 2023)

We contend that binary discourse is the norm in most organisations' language, policies, and decision-making frameworks, creating barriers to transformative change.

While binary thinking is readily apparent in constructs such as male/female, leader/follower, and success/failure, some of its impacts – such as oversimplification, constraints on inclusivity, linearity, judgement, decontextualisation, devaluing non-rational ways of knowing, trauma-ignored practice, and more, maybe less immediately apparent yet nevertheless implicitly shape organisational agendas.

For example, we contend that the notion of 'fair and unfair' in human resource management (HRM), given the profession's colonial origins, is informed by a Western social construction of fairness. As such, using this historically (see footnote 1 for the reason for using this spelling) embedded norm to enact so-called organisational 'best practices' unreflexively risks perpetuating systemic injustices by masking or reproducing issues of power and privilege these practices ostensibly seek to redress.

In our work within the HR function, we have observed firsthand how binary thinking perpetuates epistemic othering in organisational contexts. We propose that a pressing – yet, we believe, unarticulated – challenge is to foster non-binary ways of thinking in domains such as managerialism and human resource management, which are epistemologically shaped by both binary and capitalist logic (Cunliffe, 2009; Klikauer, 2015; Sanders, Bednall and Yang 2021; Sanders, Cogin and Bainbridge, 2014). Binary mindsets are not merely individual cognitive habits but are structurally and culturally embedded. We believe this to be the enduring legacy of coloniality's dualistic paradigm.

We propose that non-binary thinking is a prerequisite for transformative EDI work because it allows organisations to move beyond rigid dichotomies, enabling them to better address the complexities of identity, decision-making, and systemic inequalities. However, the process of implementing systemic change in binary-dominated spaces is emotionally and psychologically demanding, often leading to fatigue and disillusionment among practitioners. In this connection, we have found that "externalising" issues and feelings of inadequacy when dealing with historical, institutional and systemic phenomena is a helpful coping strategy. This Narrative Therapy concept intentionally separates people from their problems by framing issues as external entities rather than inherent traits (White, 1989).

Despite the contribution of critical theory, outside of explicitly anti-colonial initiatives, organisations typically continue to operate on the supposition that there is an objectively 'right' and 'wrong' way of

doing things (Hoekstra and Kaptein, 2020; Watkins, 2013). This mindset stems from a Western, positivist view of management, tethered to colonial logic. Here, issues and solutions are taken as objective, measurable, and governed by universal laws (Weick, 1995). In such a paradigm, the right solutions are “discovered” by professionals through scientifically validated management methods and presented as immutable ‘best practices.’ In our work we see how this all-or-nothing approach and decontextualisation devalues marginalised voices and often leads to organisational cultures characterised by tension, conflict, confusion, scepticism, othering and “moral ambiguity and angst” (Kraatz and Block, 2017, p. 19; Goh, 2023).

To challenge binary thinking is to challenge a worldview that is affectively and intellectually experienced as normal, natural, and inevitable – the one right way of ordering reality. The good/bad binary mobilises and maintains elite claims to unique expertise and superior moral virtue co-constituted with tropes such as certainty, neutrality, modernity, and purity. This meshwork is held in place by othering, judgement, and a strong sense of entitlement, all of which work against people developing skills in self-reflection. It is not surprising, therefore, that efforts to unsettle a binary worldview can provoke considerable resistance, woundedness, and affront: after all, we are suggesting that an erstwhile firm foundation needs to go, and implicitly troubling claims to ‘goodness’. Taking care to build a vocabulary that maps out the old frameworks and makes visible what is being co-created and that replaces judgement with accountability and modelling relationality, love, and systemic thinking are needed for transformative change.

### **Polyphony: A Framework for Non-Binary Organising**

We acknowledge that adopting a critical stance may inadvertently reinforce the very dualisms we seek to challenge. As such, the foregoing is offered in a spirit of curiosity, inquiry, and reflexivity.

Traditional management structures are hierarchical and monologic, reflecting what Foucault (1995) describes as disciplinary power – where authority is maintained through surveillance, normalisation, and the suppression of alternative discourses. The dominance of binary thinking collapses fluid and emergent realities into rigid either/or categories, obscuring nuance and reinforcing hierarchical exclusions giving a unitarist perspective of the single story.

In contrast, a polyphonic approach embraces multiple authoritative perspectives without imposing a single authoritarian narrative. Bakhtin (1984) proposed that novels by Dostoyevsky were structured polyphonically, that is, they consisted of a ‘multiplicity of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses... each with equal rights and its own world [that] combine, but do not merge, into the unity of an event’ (ibid, p. 208). Bakhtin used this idea in his novels, where multiple independent voices (characters) exist without being dominated by a single authoritarian perspective, allowing different viewpoints to coexist and interact. In this pluralistic view, human assemblies consist of diverse illuminating consciousnesses.

The act of organising in a multivoiced system is a dialogical, not a monological endeavour. Instead, a polyphonic approach recognises and ethically coordinates a multiplicity of voices which are sometimes harmonious, dissonant, clashing, ambiguous and complex. Such a paradigmatic change to how we understand organisations can provide meaningful insights so that organisations can be truly inclusive (Hazen, 1993). Polyphony is said to exist in ‘moments when people from different social realities come

together, and each person's voice is solicited, allowed to speak, heard and valued equally to co-create the future' (Rodriguez, 2001a, p. 5). A way of inculcating this into organisational culture is to reimagine managing as polyvocal organising, i.e., where work is seen as an interdependent, relational achievement, and where meaning isn't located in managerial utterances alone (Gergen and Gergen, 2010, p. 263) but by creating the conditions for appreciating and blending of multiple voices.

If we take organisations as polyphonic to be axiomatic, myriad voices can feel like indistinguishable noise, an environment animated and illuminated in the 'spirit of carnival and mystery (Bakhtin and Holquist, 1981, p. 255). Amidst the chaos and complexity, multiple voicings might sound more like 'cacophony' (Schwabland, 2012, p. 187; Simon, 2012, p. 2). In this context, the musical term polyphony serves as a metaphor for coordinating or curating diverse voices and perspectives that exist in human systems. Applied to organisations, polyphony can be thought of as stories-lived and stories-told. To be dialogically engaged in this context is to be committed to ethical, communal forms of organising which, amongst other things, is about noticing whether there are stories currently unheard, yet unknown and untellable (Pearce, 2009) as these often point to conscious and unconscious forms of subjugation and marginalisation masked as cultural norms.

Organisations take polyphony seriously when they embrace inclusion, celebrate differences, and actively create a culture where each member's voice is sought and equally valued as the norm (Rodriguez, 2001b; Hazen, 1993). This form of dialogical engagement is based on the assumption that multi-voiced organising can foster new, more sensitive ways of relating, raise new questions and lead to collaborative practices (Gergen and Gergen, 2010).

Polyphonic organising allows contradictions to exist without forcing resolution, encouraging dialogue and ongoing learning. Unlike binary models that prioritise closure, polyphony values process, complexity and uncertainty as catalysts for deeper understanding and innovation.



Lived reality is rarely binary.

Consider the story of Nasreddin, the wise and humorous Middle Eastern figure.

Sitting by a riverbank, he hears a man on the opposite side shout, "How do I get to the other side?" Nasreddin replies, "You are on the other side!" (Taylor et al., 2020, p. 9).

This story can be understood as illustrating the relativity and multiplicity of perspectives. What is "the other side" to one person is "this side" to another.

*Image generated by ChatGPT*

Indeed, organisational issues and solutions are rarely absolute and objective. Instead, they exist within a web of interconnected, contextual, and often conflicting values and perspectives. Take, for example, UK employment law, where gender-affirming and gender-critical views are both protected characteristics (see section 10 of the UK Equality Act 2010 and Employment Appeal Tribunal (EAT) case of Forstater v. CGD Europe (2021). In practice, organisations find this challenging to mediate because advocates of both views are passionate about what they believe. New behaviours and collaborations are constrained by the limitations of binary thinking structures. In this example, what might a non-

binary culture look like? What if we viewed gender-affirming and gender-critical perspectives not as incompatible stances but as two of countless viewpoints existing within a vast and diverse spectrum of opinions and beliefs? What needs to happen for gender-critical and gender-affirming advocates to engage in a respectful conversation where disagreement can occur without causing harm? Or is the impulse to first create a pair of protagonists and second suggest polyphony as a universal solution itself indicative of a deep allegiance to a binary mindset? For example, let's say the dispute is that gender-affirming trans women and their advocates believe trans women exist, and gender-critical cis women and their advocates dispute this claim. Might the urge to hold space for polyphony, in fact, lure us into disingenuously endorsing a false equivalence between this and other examples, a concern elucidated by the quote, 'We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist?' Further, given our location, we are constantly negotiating the enduring legacy of coloniality and imperialism, including specific onto-epistemological violence enacted on Indigenous peoples through the imposition of Western ideas about sexuality and gender. The proposition that a trans woman cannot exist needs a hierarchical logic to be rendered comprehensible. This logic is predicated on the rejection of mutuality. Does advancing a goal of mutuality-in-dialogue make us complicit in obfuscating "hxtories" of "Othering" (Hipplewith, 2023, p. 3)<sup>1</sup>, flattening power and protecting a hegemonic worldview, so contributing to coloniality's ongoing project of "epistemicide" (de Sousa Santos, 2015)? As EDI practitioners, these are questions held in mind when we ponder how to make broad and lasting change within a context where binary thinking is dominant and marginalised people's lives are in danger.

### **Traditional Management Practice Producing Negative Peace**

Martin Luther King, Jr. used the term 'negative peace' to refer to a superficial sense of order that prioritises stability over justice, humanity, and love. This protects the status quo, centring elite comfort, with a significant inequitable cost. The abolitionist social worker Resmaa Menakem distinguishes between the 'clean pain' of integrity, reckoning, and repair and the 'dirty pain' of denial and avoidance (Menakem, 2021).

Here are some examples of how 'negative peace' and 'dirty pain' are created by traditional management practices:

- **Capability, Disciplinary, Grievance and Performance Management Processes**

These are intended to create and regulate 'good' or 'desired' behaviour. Lacking sensitivity to nuance, formal procedures can fail to address microaggressions, micromanagement, disregard of expertise, and 'invisibilising' colleagues due to un/conscious beliefs of inferiority and insignificance. Those most harmed lose faith in, and avoid, formal processes often resulting in resentment, despair, and illness. When this pattern is ignored, these subjugating behaviours are normalised.

- **Mediation and Consultation Processes**

These processes are meant to help staff reconcile differences. However, when conducted as

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<sup>1</sup> We use Hippleworth's re-frame of capitalised 'O' to refer to colonised Others, and the use of hxstory with "x" instead of "i" to re-fine the term as non-gendered.

binary win/lose or win/win processes, they are not designed to foster mutuality, healing, or deep change and can result in resentment. Both parties (and the team) can continue to experience 'dirty pain', awkwardly avoiding one another as much as possible.

- **Measuring Turnover**

Low turnover is often used as a metric to measure employee engagement and sense of belonging. However, another narrative is that people might not be staying because they feel valued and respected, but because the industry or sector, on the whole, is toxic or specifically oppressive (e.g., ableist), and it's better to stay than risk trying to go elsewhere.

A conventional business approach to EDI has failed to grasp that embracing diversity involves innovating pluralistic practices as an inherently valuable end, not merely as a means for commercial success. This includes diversity in knowledge sources, as above.

Polyphonic organising requires a radical alteration in the assumptions that guide perceptions and world-building. Such a shift necessarily involves reframing from individualised performance management and its systems of control to relational skills for inculcating reflexivity, curiosity, deep listening, generative storytelling, and living with ambiguity.

In the UK, legislation exists to enhance equity, diversity, inclusion, and justice for individuals with specific protected characteristics. However, legislation often fails to lead to systemic change and is inadequate in addressing intersectionality.

It's unlikely that we are the only EDI practitioners or allies who have faced backlash during discussions about un/conscious bias, particularly when using examples like racism, sexism, or ableism. We often receive feedback from attendees who felt that their specific type of discrimination was overlooked. How do we address such concerns? It may require us to rethink our approach to these issues, break down the barriers that separate them, and begin examining and addressing the mindset that allows all forms of discrimination to persist. Additionally, we may need to reevaluate how we view our own identities. It's essential to recognise the influence that our identities have on our experiences while also understanding that identities are subjective constructs that change over time and are dependent on context. By recognising the fluidity and subjectivity of our identities, we may better understand how our own liberation is connected to that of others. This awareness can help us shift from viewing equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) work as a series of trade-offs to seeing it as progress towards a liberation that benefits all life.

it is rhyme time at the library the green and pleasant breadth of the country we teach  
our toddlers gender stereotypes where all the mummies on the bus go shush shush  
shush obviously daddies are the bosses and they read read read or sleep sleep sleep  
right order is vital we need these cerebral cogs and wheels to go round and round and  
round and round ad mindless infinatum to ensure combat for future generations rhyme  
time as well-oiled war effort happily we calibrate young minds to sing-song-along in the  
twinkle twinkle simple logic of misogyny indoctrination dutifully trips incy wincy off the  
tongue a treat, it's normal and its nice and neatly crystallised and candied march them  
up to the top of the hill and lodges oh so very deep how gruesomely these tunes conscript  
the kids to think in dualistic splits it's all so and white and black and categorised quite  
naturally by race and rank and class genitalia's insignia good-naturedly you bifurcate  
their brains as you clap and squat and kneel and stand at ease in a regime equipped to

milk intolerance from infancy how deftly we get you essentializing gender as you tidy-up the teddies disappear the queers flat-pack my younger self to stunt in the boxes that you've bought into baa baa orange sheep is cosmetic unless it is systemic all this jingoistic thinking synchronises minds retains in place a docile league of moderates who even now committedly unwittingly cement the next Grenfell.

(Aphramor, 2018)

### **Emotional and Professional Binary**

body be canvas body as magnet and compass map and projection be threshold,  
umbrella term, shelter dissenting desiring beloved and haptic enchanted  
entrancing trajectory of whole-souled and shifting direction body be your own  
curriculum unction benediction

be shameless unfazed marbled with blessings never be nameless again rejecting  
ensoriousness choose the sensorium be safe-placed body breathe body breathe body  
grieve

(Aphramor, 2023)

Another way we've seen binary thinking hinder EDI work is by devaluing embodied, non-rational knowing, leading, among other results, to 'tone policing'. This proscribes a limited range and intensity of emotional expression as professionally appropriate. Rooted in a mind/body split, tone policing sanctions the calm and composed delivery of microaggressions and negates their injurious impact. It seeks to discredit people whose 'strong' emotional responses are deemed inappropriate – assessed against white middle-class norms - with classist and racialised consequences. It requires people who experience prolonged bullying or intentional exclusion, for example, to present emotionally in ways that are inconsistent with their felt reality to reduce the likelihood of being ignored, punished, or shamed. The resulting dramaturgical stress is a health hazard, important knowledge of workplace culture is lost, and the status quo is stabilised.

### **The Messy Nature of Human Relationships**

Unlike experiments in a laboratory, organisational life is shaped by context-bound and emergent human relationships and human traits such as personalities, emotions, assumptions and socialisation – unpredictable variables that cannot be controlled. As such, organisational success is much more than scientifically derived best practices or technical solutions (Gergen and Thatchenkery, 2004). It requires leaning into human traits like grace, trust, respect, embodied resonance and ethical decision-making. It's about embracing the paradoxes and uncertainties that come with diverse perspectives and experiences. The complexity present within an organisation mirrors the broader context in which it operates. By embracing and learning to manage this internal complexity, an organisation may be better equipped to navigate the complexities of its external environment and navigate the meniscus between this binary.

Leaders who cling to rigid, universal, binary "best practices" to support organisational functioning and staff development invariably overlook complex relational dynamics and relational patterns and the inherent tensions therein. In this setting, when techno or bureaucratic solutions based on power and

privilege are imposed, they subjugate the very people they're meant to help. Instead, role leaders should be re-framed from problem-solvers to shared intelligence facilitators, responsible for creating safe conditions that foster no-blame conversations and collaborative action.

### **A Pedagogy of Love: A Human Approach to Organisation Development**

To transition from binary to non-binary organising, organisations must cultivate environments where diverse voices are heard, valued, and integrated into decision-making processes. This requires adopting a pedagogy of love – a concept introduced by Paulo Freire (1998) that emphasises education as an act of liberation grounded in empathy, respect, and transformative dialogue.

Incorporating love as an organisational principle means prioritising relational skills such as deep listening, ethical sense-making, and trust-building over rigid managerial solutions. This shift challenges traditional power structures, reframing leadership as a facilitative rather than authoritative role.

The pedagogy of love remains underexplored in business studies, though its relevance to non-profit organisations and social justice movements is evident (Dennihy and Katz, 2024; Ferguson, 2024). By integrating love-based organising principles, organisations can move beyond transactional diversity initiatives towards systemic, self-sustaining inclusivity and emergence.

This shift from binary to non-binary ways of being begins by fostering environments where diverse voices feel heard and valued. It's about creating safe spaces where people can engage in meaningful, future-focused dialogue without fear of judgment or exclusion (K. Gergen and Gergen, 2010; K. J. Gergen, 2015). In this post-modern, post-structural paradigm, leaders must prioritise relational skills – listening, sense-making, and creating trust – over agreeing to managerially conceived solutions. By doing so, they move away from unitarily conceived mission statements to co-producing possibilities. Freedom within a (hierarchical) framework (Collins, 2011) is no freedom at all.

For example, leaders could facilitate open, empathetic and reflecting conversations instead of trying to understand and “fix” an organisational culture issue through data-driven matrices which depend on objective and measurable problems and solutions. The cultural and behavioural practices that prevent organisations from reaching the EDI objectives are rarely visible and quantifiable using the bureaucratic and managerial tools that most organisations have come to depend on. Microaggressions, for example, that lead to a toxic working environment and may never be detected by traditional HR investigative processes, where no attempt have been made to foster psychological safety. A co-creative relational approach, however, allows teams to collaboratively identify challenges and design solutions, making them more sustainable, relevant, and rooted in their unique context.

### **Creating the Conditions for Non-binary Organising**

From a social constructionist perspective, leadership is no longer about being the expert with all the answers (Ann L Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011) but rather about fostering connection and understanding across diverse perspectives. This requires humility, patience, and a willingness to embrace complexity. It also requires a commitment to foster group reflection and learning derived from inclusive conversations. Organisations that embrace this approach can transform their cultures, making them

more adaptive, inclusive, and innovative. Relational leadership is not a strategy; it's a mindset shift – one that acknowledges the messy realities of human interaction while being mindful not to 'Other others'. John Shotter, 2011, calls this "witness" thinking, which, for us, is a prerequisite for EDI work. According to Shotter, unlike "aboutness" thinking, which seeks to analyse and represent reality from a detached, objective stance, "witness" thinking involves interacting in a collaborative, dialogical manner. It focuses on the lived, embodied experiences of being "with" others, fostering mutual understanding through shared meaning-making and responsiveness. This approach values the unfolding, dynamic nature of interactions, recognising that meaning emerges through ongoing relationships rather than static, pre-defined categories (Shotter, 2005, 2011).

Moving beyond binary frameworks has profound implications for the efficacy of EDI efforts as it allows organisations to:

- Embrace diverse identities and perspectives more generatively.
- Address and co-create systemic equity with sensitivity.
- Foster cultures of belonging that transcend traditional notions of inclusion.

A polyphonic approach offers the view that all organisation members have a unique embodied voice formed by experience and shaped by perception. Recognising this and reframing managing as listening to, blending, and coordinating differences is more likely to put organisations on the journey to becoming genuinely inclusive.

For example, discrimination protection extends to both people with gender-affirming and gender-critical views. In this context polyphonic view of organisations calls for the development of inclusive cultures where different views can co-exist, in the context of acceptance, belonging and grace, without the need to subjugate.

Binary thinking thrives in hierarchical and monologic structures where power is centralised, and alternative perspectives are suppressed (Foucault, 1995). In this context, some argue that critical race theory is a revolutionary movement (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023) that operates as a counter-hegemonic framework aimed at deconstructing and replacing dominant racial narratives (Bell, 1995).

We argue that the status quo, in particular, pushback from the Right, is a manifestation of a world where binary thinking is the dominant discourse. This manifests as rigid "either-or" choices in how we perceive difference. While binaries provide a sense of clarity and control, they often oversimplify complex realities, stifle creativity, and create conflict – and conflict avoidance. The polyphonic view of organisation, as theorised by Bakhtin, offers a compelling alternative – organisations that foster dialogue, inclusivity, and a deep understanding of living graciously with complexity, dilemmas and difference.

Contradictions are not problems to be eliminated but opportunities for deeper understanding. Unlike binary thinking, which seeks closure, polyphony values uncertainty and ongoing dialogue.

It acknowledges the plurality of human experiences and fosters a culture where individuals are seen in their full complexity rather than reduced to roles or labels.

## **Polyphony and the Pedagogy of Love as a Path to a More Dynamic and Inclusive Human System**

All that you touch  
You Change.

All that you Change  
Changes you.

The only lasting truth  
is Change.

God  
is Change.

Octavia Butler, 2023

Cultures characterised by binary thinking are organised around colonial values giving an assemblage that cannot simply be changed through linear, transactional initiatives. We reiterate that in a world polarised by simplistic "either-or" thinking, embracing polyphonic structures in organisations, governments, and societies could lead to more humane, innovative, and sustainable solutions to the issues articulated at the beginning of this article.

We do not have a blueprint or an off-the-shelf method for creating a self-sustaining, self-regulating, self-caring, resilient, polyphonic organisation. This is a context-specific, co-created process unique to each communal setting. We are, however, keen to point to adrienne maree brown, the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute and adjacent work from other Black community organisers and scholars, such as 'Hospicing Modernity' Machado di Oliveira, 2021) as these resonate with, diffract from, and expand on these principles and centre the pedagogy of love – a concept first put forward by Paulo Freire (Freire, 1998). Freire, a liberation theologian, emphasises education as an act of liberation centred on respect, empathy, and transformative dialogue based on love. When applied to organisations, we argue that this approach can foster a polyphonic culture where multiple voices contribute to the decision-making process, creating a dynamic, self-sustaining, self-organising structure as it relates to radical inclusion through open dialogue, deep listening, mutual care, and collective and emotional intelligence.

John Dewey, American philosopher, psychologist and education reformer, focuses on love in his human-centred approach to democracy and learning. His pedagogy embodies an ethic of care, community, and relational learning, where education is not merely about transferring knowledge but also about nurturing growth, fostering curiosity, and cultivating deep human connections. Dewey saw love as the foundation of democratic learning, where people engage not as hierarchical figures but as co-participants in a shared journey. Love, in Deweyan terms, is the commitment to justice, equity, and the well-being of others.

Love as a pedagogy is not widely researched in business studies. This concept is more prevalent in education, psychology and social work. We notice that it is not explored in non-profit organising. One explanation is that non-profits have been turning to for-profit organising solutions since the 1950s.

This trend is referred to variously as managerialisation, commercialisation and professionalisation (Maier et al., 2014, p. 2). This trend has been problematic as studies suggest that values incongruence from imposing business practice in prosocial organisations begets organisational cultures characterised by inter and intra-organisational tensions and conflict, which in turn creates dysfunctional organisational cultures that can detract from the achievement of mission objectives (Hwang and Powell, 2009: 270). The authors suggest that as a precursor to creating non-binary systems in organisation practitioners, particularly those in prosocial organisations, might do well to examine the consequence of neoliberal commercial organising and look instead to alternatives which are more congruent to their values and worldview. Organising based on the pedagogy of love and/or care may prove transformative. This might include researching how pedagogical approaches rooted in love, generosity, care, and partnership can transform our traditional understanding of organisational development, learning, and equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) efforts (Dennihy and Katz, 2024; Ferguson, 2024; Love and Blankstein, 2024). We would dearly love to see more research in this area because of its potential to transcend binary discourse in EDI work.

## In Conclusion

The persistence of binary thinking in organisations limits inclusivity and innovation. To create meaningful change, EDI efforts must move beyond programmatic interventions towards a fundamental rethinking of organisational structures and decision-making processes.

By embracing polyphonic organising and the pedagogy of love, organisations are more likely to create cultures that transcend hierarchical binaries, fostering environments where complexity is embraced rather than suppressed. This paradigm shift is essential for building sustainable, inclusive systems that socially construct the diverse realities of human experience.

The future of EDI work depends not on more programmes but on transforming the way organisations operate, interact, and make decisions. In a world increasingly defined by polarisation, non-binary, relational frameworks offer a generative path forward – one that prioritises justice, equity, and the collective well-being of all. Referring to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, Maria Popova, American philosopher, essayist and poet, asks:

“What if our worship of binary logic is what warped Wonderland? Who would we be if our “artificial” intelligence turned natural, built on the nonbinary logic of symbiosis, restoring the unity of life into a perfect circle with no sides to take?” Popova, 2025

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