

KALEIDOSCOPIIC INQUIRIES: QUEERING APPROACHES TO  
ORGANIZATIONAL DIVERSITY WORK

by

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Kaleidoscopic inquiries: Queering approaches to organizational diversity work

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This multi-site qualitative research project situates *organizational diversity work* as its object of study. I utilize a queer theoretical framework that centers attention on the role of *normativity* in diversity work, which I subsequently frame through the use of *kaleidoscopic methodology*. I find that diversity work assists in producing an ontological bifurcation of the individual and organization that ultimately emphasizes the individual and frames the organization as primarily an accessory to personal development. My analysis traces three metaphors related to diversity work – *journey*, *container*, and *table* – and considers them alongside the practices of *training*, *data collection*, and *positional leadership* as a means of understanding how this bifurcation arises in diversity work and its potential effects. The pernicious bifurcation of organization and individual serves to reinstate the very inequities that diversity work seeks to address, necessitating a more durable disruption of both diversity work and organizing.

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## Introduction

To engage in organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion work in the United States (hereafter referred to as “diversity work”) is to contend with the historical and ongoing interweaving of white supremacy, coloniality, management, and organizing (Nkomo & Al Ariss, 2014). The urgency of diversity work, at least in terms of visibility and organizational attention, has only increased in recent years, made painfully evident in the continued institutional violence enacted by the criminal justice system onto Black and African American communities (Mallick, 2020, September 11). Despite this exigence, and a preoccupation with diversity work in the US among practitioners, scholars, and the public at large for well over 60 years (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014), achieving diversity work’s stated aim of equality remains illusory. Over the past decades, discourses of nationalism and xenophobia have also risen alongside diversity work’s organizational ascendance (Nadiv & Kuna, 2020), in addition to a social climate awash with racist violence: “In 2017 there were over 7,000 hate crimes reported to the FBI, and in 2018 hate crimes rose to their highest figure in twenty years” (Nkomo et al., 2019, p. 505).

Amidst this social backdrop, organization members, and leadership in particular, have increasingly framed issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity (DEI) as an organizational priority. Diversity work can be traced back to the 1960s, when early trainings on cultural sensitivity “aimed to change people’s attitudes towards marginalised groups” (Brewis, 2017, p. 520). Today, U.S. companies spend an estimated \$8 billion each year on diversity and inclusion initiatives (Lipman, 2018, January 25), with technology companies alone investing \$1.2 billion from 2013-2017 on recruiting diverse employees (Stangel, 2017, February 13). The work of diversity is big business.

Scholarship on diversity work has also steadily increased in organization studies since the 1990s. The bulk of this literature has largely come from the subfield of diversity management, defined as “the practical application of how differences are and should be managed in organizations, and to what ends” (Holck et al., 2016, p. 2). Scholars note that diversity management has come to dominate conceptualizations of difference in organizational contexts in the United States and beyond, given that “diversity management has become an increasingly dominant way in which differences among people are understood and governed within western organizations” (Brewis, 2017, p. 519).

Despite significant effort, financial investment, and academic research on diversity work to address societal inequities, the results of such practices are ambiguous: “many organizational change initiatives focused on diversity fall short of goals, have unintended negative effects, or are short-lived” (Groggins & Ryan, 2013, p. 265). In a review of organizational diversity work in the United States, Nkomo and Hoobler (2014) conclude that “after well over a century of research and practice, researchers still appear unsure of how to achieve social cohesion and equality and how to sell the need to continue the effort” (p. 255). Training has grown in popularity as a significant activity related to diversity work, yet its effectiveness in prompting positive and sustained organizational change remains suspect and may even have a deleterious effect on diversity work’s stated aims (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Kalev et al., 2006; Wilton et al., 2019).

Perhaps most troubling, workplace inequities persist in spite of diversity work efforts. Ferguson and Konig (2018) found that racial segregation in U.S. workplaces is currently higher than it was in the 1970s, despite notable increases in the racial diversity of the workforce. Quillian and others (2017) found that between 1989 and 2015 racial discrimination in hiring did

not meaningfully decrease, holding steady over the 25-year time frame. Such literature indicates that logics of white privilege and white supremacy persist in management and organizational activity (Nkomo & Al Ariss, 2014). While slavery, anti-Black racism, and colonialism were foundational to modern management and organizational practices, management and organization scholars have yet to fully acknowledge and reckon with the implications of this history and its continuing legacies (Cooke, 2003; Frenkel & Shenhav, 2006; Rosenthal, 2019). As Opie and Roberts (2017) succinctly surmise: “Overwhelming evidence suggests that black lives do not matter in the American workplace” (p. 707). Given the urgency of this moment, the status quo that operates in service to logics of whiteness and coloniality must be disrupted. Despite the values of social justice and human rights that historically undergirded diversity work efforts (Tomlinson & Schwabenland, 2010), diversity work does not appear to be achieving meaningful change in its stated aims of making organizations more diverse, inclusive, and equitable.

In order to address entrenched organizational white supremacy and achieve aims of equity, justice, and belonging, diversity work must institute a fundamental and sustained disruption of the status quo. Queer theorizing provides a generative starting point for such an intervention, as an important and underutilized mode of inquiry capable of addressing both the material and empirical concerns of enacting and studying diversity work. Rumens (2018) discusses queer theory as an analytic that extends beyond an interrogation of heteronormativity to examine normativity writ large: “the practice of queering is a mode of critique that aims to work within, work against and transcend normative regimes and processes of normalization” (Rumens, 2018, p. 1). Scholars have sought to more intentionally theorize feminist, intersectional, anti-racist, and transnational frameworks in their analyses of organizational

diversity (Zanoni et al., 2010), though among this critical scholarship queer theorizing has had a minimal presence in diversity management literature (Bendl & Hofmann, 2015).

A queer approach provides a nuanced understanding of how norms shape enactments of diversity work and possibilities for what can and cannot count as diversity work. In the context of queering, norms “enact a certain organizational reality” (Holck & Muhr, 2017, p. 9) that can reify inequalities and limit ways of identifying, making norms a crucial site of critical inquiry. Nascent efforts to apply a queer approach to diversity work have largely focused on deconstructing categories and binaries at play in diversity work and the workplace (Christensen, 2018; Gedro & Mizzi, 2014). Building from the important initial steps that this literature has made, I argue that queer theorizing’s potential to durably disrupt the organizational status quo remains unrealized.

This research project therefore applies a queer theoretical lens to the study of diversity work, as a means of disrupting and decentering current conceptualizations of diversity work in management and organization studies. In so doing, I frame diversity work as both a discursive formation and embodied practice that functions in much the same way as other conceptions of work in organizational communication. In a call for a revised agenda of research in difference studies, Ashcraft (2011) notes that work can be conceived of “as a discursive formation that evolves across many sites of cultural activity” (p. 15). I suggest that scholars might usefully think of diversity work in a similar fashion, wherein empirical studies provide the opportunity to understand diversity work’s “cultural (re)production...in and across multiple sites” as well as its variegated “representations, negotiations, and enactments” (Ashcraft, 2011, p. 15).

Given the relative dearth of empirical studies that seek to understand diversity work as it is enacted and experienced in organizational contexts (Mutsaers & Trux, 2015), this project



mobilizes a multi-sited qualitative research approach that weaves together data from participant observation, document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and autoethnographic accounts of diversity work in a variety of organizational contexts. A rise in critical scholarship has provided important work in interrogating the positivist foundations of diversity management studies rooted in capitalism and managerialism, though this work has largely operated at the theoretical, rather than empirical, level (Zanoni et al., 2010). A mobilization of queer sensibilities in my methodological framework, which I explicate through the metaphor of kaleidoscope, provides a means of utilizing a critical approach to an empirical study of diversity work. Kaleidoscope as queer methodology seeks to identify and interrogate norms as they arise in organizational practice, while also critically situating normativity among broader sociohistorical contexts of organizing. For this project, I engage kaleidoscope as a means of understanding how norms arise in organizational members' sensemaking and practice of diversity work, and in what ways normative constructions might disrupt or reify inequities in organizing. I therefore weave kaleidoscope as a queer approach to qualitative research throughout the analysis of data and explication of findings in this thesis.

In reviewing literature relevant to empirical research on organizational diversity work, I first turn to difference literature in the field of organizational communication, as a means of grounding this study in communication theorizing that contends with power, work, and identity. This framing assists in my examination of both critical diversity management literature and communication-centered literature on diversity work. The limitations of extant diversity work scholarship, particularly in struggling to provide a nuanced interrogation of power, inequity, and daily practice, suggest that queer theorizing and a critical attention to normativity is uniquely suited to contend with diversity work as an object of study. Through a discussion of my

methodological approach, I situate kaleidoscope as a means of further addressing the dearth of queer methods in organizational research (McDonald, 2017).

My analysis of the qualitative data suggests that norms arising in diversity work sensemaking and practice help to instantiate a bifurcation of the individual and organization, a kind of ontological cleaving that foregrounds the individual and relegates the organization to the background as relatively inconsequential. This persistent separation of organization and individual helps to isolate diversity work apart from other organizational activity, and results in greater scrutiny and labor for people with marginalized identities. Leadership emerges as an important figure capable of spanning the individual-organization divide and translating individual action to meaningful organizational change. However, the enshrinement of and dependence upon positional leadership limits opportunities for organizational members to affect change at the level of daily practice, leaving the bifurcation of individual and organization, and the inequities it produces, intact.

I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this study for diversity work scholars and practitioners, arguing that norms emerging in daily practice and accounts of diversity work often operate in service to broader ideological and structural systems of whiteness and coloniality. Ultimately, a queer approach to organizational research troubles notions of organization and organizing as apolitical or neutral entities, revealing logics of whiteness and coloniality that undergird organizational practice. “Organization” and “organizing” as modern concepts and practices might therefore be thought of as technologies of whiteness and coloniality that ensure inequities persist, and fields of study like organizational communication are inevitably implicated in these dynamics. Diversity work must be otherwise, and its disruption

might signify the productive undoing of organization itself, and the bountiful otherwise that lies beyond normative ways of being and doing together.

### **Literature Review**

In grounding my understanding of diversity work, I first turn to difference literature in the field of organizational communication, which provides vital frameworks for conceptualizing organizing, communication, and power in relation to difference. I argue that such a framing can serve as a necessary reconceptualization of diversity work proffered in diversity management literature, which tends to struggle in extending research beyond the bounds of the business case and managerialism. Next, I provide a review of the limited scholarship that utilizes an explicitly communicative approach to diversity work, suggesting that such work can be augmented by a practice-based lens that more adequately contends with power. Finally, I present queer theorizing as a means of more durably interrogating the organizational status quo in the context of diversity work.

### **Theorizing Diversity Work through Difference Literature**

Difference theorizing in the field of organizational communication provides a vital conceptual framework for understanding diversity work as an object of study that takes seriously how difference structures organizing and is constituted through communication. By and large, difference literature has not focused on diversity work per se, in terms of explicit organizational enactments of diversity, equity, and inclusion values (Mease, 2016). I therefore draw upon a communicative approach to difference as a foundational and relatively underutilized framing for research on diversity work. Most research on diversity work has stemmed from the field of diversity management, and I argue that a communicative approach extends this literature in important ways.

Scholars broadly define diversity management as how and why diversity ought to be, or currently is, managed organizationally (Holck et al., 2016, p. 2). Both instrumental and critical approaches to diversity management tend to problematically foreground managerialism and the “business case” for diversity. Difference literature’s perspectives on organizing, communication, and power provide an important means of reframing *diversity management* as *diversity work*, in a way that allows for scholarship to move beyond debating the business case for diversity and to extend the point of inquiry outside of management. What follows is therefore not intended to be an exhaustive review of diversity work literature, as other scholars have conducted (Nkomo et al., 2019; Zanoni et al., 2010). Rather, I outline the key aspects of a communicative approach to difference and elucidate how such a framing assists in reconceptualizing diversity work as it is theorized in diversity management.

### ***Difference, Organizing, and Power***

Difference literature in organizational communication motivates a necessary reconceptualization of difference as an organizing principle that shapes work and the workplace, rather than an organizational variable held by people. Traditionally, the field of organizational communication understood differences such as race, gender, and sexuality as an aspect of individuals or groups within organizations, or as a property of organizations themselves (Ashcraft, 2011). For example, Compton (2016) studies how organizational policies and interactions with coworkers impact how gay and lesbian employees manage their sexual identities within an organization. The focal point of the study remains on a subset of sexual identity minorities and their behaviors within specific organizations.

As a departure from this approach, Ashcraft (2011) argues for reframing difference not as something existing in organizations, but rather as “an organizing principle of the meaning,

structure, practice, experience, and economy of work itself” (p. 8). This framing of difference helps to unseat organization as a fixed and stable container for elements such as difference and diversity, instead opting for a view of organizing “as a multisited process that unfolds beyond the bounds of discrete, formal organizations” (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2017, p. 590). Defining and theorizing difference as an organizing principle complicates the study of diversity work, challenging researchers to extend inquiry beyond difference as merely a stable characteristic held by individuals.

Communication plays a central role in how organizational communication scholars engage difference and organizing. Within an understanding of difference as an organizing principle, communication signifies an “ongoing, situated, and embodied process” that accounts for “the dynamic interweaving of material and ideational worlds” (Ashcraft et al., 2009, p. 34-35). A communicative explanation of diversity work acknowledges both the discursive and material as fundamentally entangled realms, situating communication as the dynamic site of entanglement where lived realities are (re)produced (Ashcraft, 2011). Concepts often taken for granted as self-evident in relation to work, such as the organization as a stable entity, are revealed to be in a state of flux and contestation constituted by communication. This communicative framing necessarily destabilizes organizing as a diffuse and dynamic process, rather than a static and neatly bounded affair. Communication in the context of work is therefore inherently political, in that “it facilitates representational and material conditions in which certain economic, institutional, and physical realities are more likely to find footing” (Ashcraft, 2011, p. 18). Difference, through communication, makes some realities possible while foreclosing others, meaning that communication and difference lend themselves to an inherently critical approach to organizing.

Such an understanding of communication as, in part, “a mode of explaining the formations and practices of power that constitute the organizing process” (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2017, p. 590) allows for nuanced discussions of differences such as gender, race, and coloniality that structure the status quo in organizing. For example, in examining messages about race in foundational communication texts, Ashcraft and Allen (2003) note a tendency for diversity management literature to individualize issues related to diversity and race: “racial discrimination is characterized as an unfortunate practice of people within organizations, not as a uniquely organizational product” (p. 20). More specifically in the realm of leadership, Parker and Ogilvie [sic] (1996) reveal that discussions of organizational concepts like leadership are fundamentally incomplete without a discussion of race. In a later study on African American women in leadership roles, Parker (2001) uncovers whiteness as an often unacknowledged norm at the heart of theorizing in organizational studies: “the exercise of power in theory making is also ‘raced’...Scholars tend to conceptualize organizations as race neutral, taking a dominant few (White middle-class men and women) as the inclusive group and the ideal for humankind” (p. 50). This scholarship reveals how theories that draw upon organizations as unproblematic containers for diversity reify whiteness as the norm by leaving race unacknowledged as a constitutive feature of both organizing and theorizing about organizing.

Postcolonial theorists in organizational communication have also made important efforts to “bring the marginalized Other...closer to the center of academic theorizing” (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007, p. 254). Broadfoot and Munshi (2007), among other scholars in the field, point to the role of colonialism and Western hegemony in scholarship about organization and organizing: “When we as scholars unthinkingly adopt the discourse and knowledge of mainstream Euro-American organizational communication scholarship, we potentially absorb, without reflection, a

particular way of understanding the world” (p. 264). Postcolonial scholarship helps to reveal what might be productively understood as the coloniality of organization, which speaks to how organizations not only reflect and bear the imprint of colonial logics and activities like slavery and imperial rule (Cooke, 2003; Frenkel & Shenhav, 2006; Prasad, 2003; Rosenthal, 2019), but also perpetuate ongoing acts of settler colonialism and racism. The study and practice of organizing that emerges from Western logics is inevitably and indelibly imbricated with coloniality and whiteness. Further, non-Western forms of organizing that do not abide by such logics become unrecognizable as being organizational (Cruz & Sodeke, 2020). Such scholarship on difference, organizing, and power acknowledges how the organizational status quo both arose and is consistently maintained, illuminating the ways issues of coloniality, gender, race, and sexuality are woven throughout organizational processes and concepts like management and organizational diversity.

### ***Shifting from Managing Diversity to the Work of Diversity***

A communicative approach to difference outlined above provides valuable frameworks for organizing, communication, and power capable of troubling and extending existing diversity work scholarship, which largely resides in the field of diversity management. Scholars generally trace diversity management’s inception to the late 1980s and early 1990s in the United States, when the undercutting of equal opportunity measures under the Reagan administration necessitated an alternative framing of diversity work (Mease, 2016). Nkomo and colleagues (2019) identify this as an epochal shift away from justice, anti-discrimination, and equal opportunity principles of the 1960s Civil Rights era, and their accompanying practices of legal regulations and affirmative action measures. Instead, diversity management foregrounds a business case approach to diversity, as well as managerialism, which carry a host of problems for

theorizing and mobilizing diversity work in a way that dismantles oppressive practices and opens up more ways of being and thriving in organizing. Difference literature can provide a helpful means of moving beyond the business case and managerialism, productively refashioning diversity *management* as diversity *work*.

Diversity management as a professional and academic field of interest traditionally encapsulates a “business case” discourse of diversity, wherein organizations increase the number of underrepresented minorities in an organization as a means of achieving greater organizational profit and performance (Holck & Muhr, 2017). The business case therefore signifies a fundamental disjuncture in the treatment of difference discussed above. Rather than signifying an organizing principle of work, difference becomes a means of categorizing and managing humans in service to “an organization’s bottom line” (Mease & Collins, 2018, p. 665). Such an approach frames difference as a static property of individuals existing in, and managed under the purview of, a bounded organization.

Critical diversity management scholarship over the past 25 years has sought to challenge the primacy of the business case, though such efforts tend to ironically ensure that the business case remains the focal point of the field. For example, Sharp and others (2012) utilize a feminist critical lens to dissect the way the business case constitutes “an economically instrumental approach which obscures gender relations and the sexual politics involved in achieving diversity” (p. 567). Such scholarship provides critical contributions to undoing dominant discourses of diversity in organizing. Yet, Mutsaers and Trux (2015) lament that the business case has effectively defined the landscape of diversity management studies: “the field remains dominated by academic quarrels over who has the best, preferably meta-analytic, evidence for or against the business case of diversity and its social implications” (p. 318).



Given how much business rationales and priorities have prompted and influenced academic research on diversity (Sharp et al., 2012; Zanoni et al., 2010), critical scholars would be remiss to leave the business case uninterrogated. As Mease and Collins (2018) note, “Given the widespread use of the business case, assumptions about human difference embedded in it have the power to constitute difference and fundamentally shape organizational and social contexts” (p. 666). Understanding how the business case influences understandings of difference provides valuable insights to scholars and practitioners on how to name and address such discourses. However, theoretical infighting surrounding the business case contributes to disciplinary solipsism that produces a host of problems for the field. Theoretical work debating the business case sets the informal agenda of the subfield and influences the kind of scholarship and arguments that gain airtime in scholarly conversations and journal articles, discouraging other forms of scholarship in the process. The resulting dynamic rewards broader theory discussions over uncharted critical empirical work that might also be more time consuming and riskier to conduct (Holck et al., 2016). Indeed, in their survey of critical diversity management literature, Zanoni and others (2010) point out the need for “more empirical investigations of diversity in organizational settings” (p. 17), in order to more productively extend diversity work scholarship.

In this context, sustained focus on the business case may stunt other opportunities for diversity work research and theorizing that emerges from difference as an organizational principle. More recently, scholars have begun to address the dearth of empirical research with critically-minded studies in settings that range from city governments to police forces (Holck & Muhr, 2017; Holck, 2018; Holck, 2016a; Holck, 2016b). Rather than interrogate whether or not it is morally just to mobilize diversity work for organizational profit, much of this work focuses

on “a stronger engagement with everyday practice” (Holck et al., 2016, p. 13). Moving beyond the theoretical traction of the business case provides further opportunities to not only conduct empirical research, but also engage difference as an organizing principle. Such a reframing can help scholars gain novel insights into what other discourses and normative logics might be at play in the enactment of organizational diversity work.

One such normative construction is management and managerialism, which diversity management literature often explicitly or implicitly centers. Due in part to the instrumentalism of the business case that has come to dominate the field, managerialism is thoroughly embedded in diversity management literature. Of course, “management” is itself in the name of the subfield, yet managerialism also appears indirectly in various forms that reify normative social identities and modes of being in organizing. As discussed above, organizational scholars have identified that particular social identities and ways of being operate as the unacknowledged norms in organizing, and particularly in discussions of management and managers. Collinson and Hearn (1996) note how “the association of men and management persists both in ‘theory’ and ‘practice’” (p. 2), and Carrim and Nkomo (2016) further assert that “Not only is the experience of becoming and being a manager gendered, it has also been shown to be racialized, ethnicized, and classed across a number of different national contexts” (p. 263). Under a postcolonial framework, attempts to manage diversity, or even view diversity as manageable, reveal a totalizing worldview undergirded by Western conceptualizations of subjectivity and objectivity, whereby certain bodies are positioned as “Other” in comparison to the Western managerial subject.

By continuing to center management and managers in studies of diversity work, even critically oriented diversity management scholarship can unintentionally reify organizational

norms of whiteness, masculinity, and ability, among others. For example, Just and Christiansen (2012) note that “diversity management is the set of practices by which organizations aspire to make room for and profit from diversity” (p. 323), in part referencing the business case for diversity. By speaking of organizational aspirations related to diversity, the authors implicitly invoke existing managerial leadership, presumably older, white, heterosexual, able-bodied men, as the part of the organization that aspires to and enacts diversity work. Just and Christiansen (2012) continue by saying that diversity management efforts “seek to open up organizations to new employees, creating diversity in organizations” (p. 323). This passage frames management – in the form of whiteness, able-bodiedness, and patriarchy existing outside of diversity – as the central creator and organizer in diversity work. Unseating managerialism therefore allows for an interrogation of whiteness, among other normative organizing principles, in diversity work. Put another way, allowing managerialism to remain uninterrogated in diversity work ensures that whiteness, colonialism, and patriarchy will continue to organize the work of diversity.

An explicit or implicit focus on organizational managers and leaders erases the agency of members outside of leadership, leading to oversimplified conceptualizations of diversity work. Studies that purport to focus on organizational members outside of management can still inadvertently position management as the primary enactor of diversity work. Mutsaers and Trux (2015), in their study of how organizational members respond to diversity work discourses, stress the need for “looking at diversity afresh and studying what it means to people by looking through the eyes of the beholder; that is, by centralizing the addressees of [diversity management] initiatives” (Mutsaers & Trux, 2015, p. 318). Here, organizational members outside of management are framed only as people who can behold, or receive diversity work, not as dynamic actors who play a part in constituting it. In their review of critical diversity

management literature, Zanoni and others (2010) comment on studies that “examined how diversity practitioners constantly negotiate the meaning of diversity in their jobs, struggling to balance the business case and equality rationales in order to be heard by key stakeholders, effectively advance equality, and maintain a meaningful professional identity” (p. 15). Reference to “diversity practitioners” once again highlight the work of trained practitioners and the managers that presumably hire them, rather than situating all organizational members as taking part in constituting diversity work. This elevation of managerialism does not reflect the co-constructed reality of organizational engagement in diversity work.

The focus on managerialism in diversity work is understandable. In the context of federal regulations and non-discrimination policies, members of organizational leadership are held accountable for diversity work, making diversity work the responsibility, and therefore the purview, of organizational managers and trained practitioners. Yet scholarship must push past this centralized, managerial view of diversity work to both more accurately depict diversity work’s complex enactments in organizing, and to disrupt the organizational status quo that operates in service to white supremacy, patriarchy, and coloniality. A communicative approach to difference de-centers management as the locus of power and agency, calling attention to a more fundamental, diffuse, and complex political reality of organizing. In sum, highlighting the *work* of diversity, rather than the *management* of diversity, provides an opportunity to intentionally decenter managerialism in the subfield and uncover difference as an organizing principle of work.

Through its nuanced understandings of organizing, communication, and power, difference literature provides an invaluable foundation for interrogating diversity work and challenging diversity management’s foregrounding of the business case and managerialism.

Rather than pertaining to fixed identity categories, difference signifies an organizing principle. Communication serves as the dynamic constitutive site of organizing, wherein certain differences are made to matter over others. Attending to power via communication reveals that many normative regimes structure organizational activity, including patriarchy, whiteness, and coloniality. These insights are invaluable to investigations of diversity work. And yet, communication literature largely does not empirically engage diversity work, save for a few exceptions (Caidor & Cooren, 2018; Mease 2012, 2016; Mease & Collins, 2018). I now turn to this small body of work to understand its contributions to complicating and extending diversity work as an object of study.

### **Communicative Approaches to Diversity Work Research**

Communication is undertheorized in both the instrumentalist and critical streams of diversity work literature, which generally does not account for the constitutive nature of communication in relation to both organization and diversity (Trittin & Schoeneborn, 2017). As my discussion of difference literature above demonstrates, a constitutive understanding of communication has the potential to lend itself to nuanced analyses of power and difference in diversity work. The nascent efforts to bring an explicitly communicative approach to diversity work signify an important step in this direction. However, opportunities remain to move beyond what tends to be an exclusive emphasis on discourse in this literature, to provide a more in-depth interrogation of power and materiality through empirical communication research.

In an attempt to bring communication theorizing to the fore in diversity work, Tritten and Schoeneborn (2017) draw upon a communication constitutes organizing (CCO) approach to diversity work. The authors' theoretical analysis finds that diversity management literature conceptualizes diversity as pertaining to "individually-bound criteria" such as gender, race, and

sexuality, which ultimately leaves unaddressed the ontological questions of organization and diversity (Tritten & Schoeneborn, 2017, p. 305). To this end, the authors reconceptualize diversity as a plurality of voices that accounts for “discursive diversity,” rather than a concept that encapsulates sociodemographic differences (Trittin & Schoeneborn, 2017, p. 306). This work makes important moves to recognize the gap in diversity work literature with regards to a communicative approach. And yet, this reorientation of diversity and the aims of diversity work towards “the maximization of voices and viewpoints in organizational settings” (p. 317) potentially leads to a flattening of the ways in which difference, inflected by power, history, and context, comes to matter in organizing (Allen, 2011). Diversity work theorized in such a way hinders an ability to interrogate normative regimes like whiteness in organizing, ensuring their survival and continued organizational influence. The limitations of such efforts underscore the importance of providing nuanced understandings of communication while also attending to an interrogation of how difference and normative constructions like whiteness shape organizing and diversity work (Nkomo et al., 2019).

Other communication studies provide a more concerted effort to attend to the way difference and power are imbricated in diversity work, though they tend to rely solely on communication as discourse. In a qualitative study interviewing diversity consultants, Mease (2012) finds that diversity work practitioners engage in an effort to interweave economic and social justice discourses in their efforts to achieve institutional change. This contrasts with scholarly critiques of the business case, which often operate from the assumption that economic and social justice discourses are discrete binary categories. Rather than discounting critiques of the business case, Mease (2012) argues that “scholars must continue to consider the conditions that elicit use of the business case” (p. 398), in order to better equip practitioners to name and

address the negative impacts of such a discourse on diversity work and organizing. Building from this research, Mease (2016) applies the CCO four flows framework to identify key discursive tensions that diversity consultants experience as part of their work, noting that consultants must constantly negotiate “the competing demands of social justice and organizational priorities” (p. 78). Mease and Collins (2018) extend this study of diversity professionals by also analyzing corporate diversity statements, in order to understand how business case arguments for diversity work discursively draw upon three distinct metaphors of difference: asset, liability, and possibility.

Taken together, this literature discursively disrupts stable constructions of the business case in both instrumentalist and critical diversity management literature while also foregrounding communication in the analysis. Notably, the business case provides the central framing for this scholarship, suggesting that communication research on diversity work might usefully explore other points of inquiry outside of the business case. Analysis in these studies remains exclusively focused on discourse via interviews and document analysis, leaving questions of materiality largely unaddressed and suggesting opportunities for participant observation research to further extend this work. Caidor and Cooren (2018) make an effort to understand how diversity work is practiced in situ, as they extend a CCO ventriloquial approach to analyzing a diversity work meeting at a company. The authors find that organizational members appropriate or disappropriate organizational norms surrounding colorblind or multicultural approaches to diversity in interactions with one another. These discursive appropriations or disappropriations shape organizational realities and contribute to the success or failure of diversity initiatives. While data collection involved attending and observing meetings, Caidor and Cooren’s (2018)

analysis relies exclusively on discourse gleaned from a meeting transcript, indicating opportunities to more intentionally trace materiality and discourse as interwoven in research.

Communication scholarship has made important gains in investigating diversity work with more nuanced theorizations of communication and discourse. And yet, a sometimes under-theorization of power and a focus on discourse over materiality suggests that a turn towards practice will extend this work's ability to more comprehensively theorize and interrogate diversity work.

### ***Turning to Practice***

Practice provides a critical means of foregrounding discourse while also attending to materiality and embodiment in diversity work. This analytical interweaving is crucial for reasons both theoretical and empirical. For example, Tatli (2011) argues for the importance of “exploring the role of discourse as one of the components of the diversity management field alongside material practices and social agents” (p. 248). Doing so allows Tatli (2011) to uncover a disjuncture between discourses and practices associated with diversity work: while many practitioners espouse a view of diversity work that acknowledges all humans as diverse, legal requirements largely drive organizational practices to focus on historically marginalized social identities.

Attention to practice also provides a means of addressing an ontological divide in research on diversity work precipitated by the diversity management approach. Nkomo and colleagues (2019) note that the shift towards diversity management in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century prompted a focus on individuals and individual experience within the assumed stable container of the organization. As a result, the authors argue that the managing diversity perspective “has left the field underprepared and ill-equipped to theorize about the proliferation of categorical



exclusion, dehumanizing biases and discrimination, and retrenchment of status-leveling policies” (Nkomo et al., 2019, p. 512). Janssens and Steyaert (2019) suggest that this “individualist stance” in functionalist approaches to diversity work has prompted critical scholarly responses that take on a “societist stance” which largely interrogates discourse at the expense of attending to embodiment and materiality (p. 518). The resulting ontological dualism inhibits more complex understandings of diversity work, leading Janssens and Steyaert (2019) to argue for a practice-based approach that attends to discourse, materiality, and embodiment as deeply entangled in a process of constituting organizational social orders.

Alongside Janssens and Steyaert (2019), some scholars have already acknowledged the importance of turning to practice and situated action in order to better understand diversity work. A practice-centered study of organizational enactments of diversity, equity, and inclusion centers “the *doing* of diversity work” (Mease, 2016, p. 61) in its many dispersed and distributed formulations in the context of organizing. This approach allows diversity work scholars to contribute to the political and justice-oriented roots of diversity work by “examining the processes and practices that give an initiative content and shape, the politics of ‘doing,’ as it is such ‘doings’ that are key sites for social change” (Zanoni et al., 2010, p. 20). I argue that queer theory provides a generative and useful framework for research and analysis that can both attend to embodied practice while also interrogating normative regimes in organizing.

### **Queering the Study of Diversity Work**

Queer theory is uniquely suited to build upon extant difference scholarship in organizational communication, address the current gaps and limitations of diversity management scholarship, and draw from a practice-based approach to research. McDonald (2015) suggests that queer theory seeks to interrogate and disrupt normativity while simultaneously orienting

towards political aims of addressing historical and ongoing inequities, oppressions, and injustices. Rather than interrogate sexuality, gender, race, or ability as an entry point, examining normativity writ large through a queer approach opens up expansive and unexpected possibilities for engaging diversity work. In this section I highlight nascent queer theorizing in organizational and management studies as a starting point for generatively disrupting diversity work scholarship. Queer approaches can fruitfully decenter managerialism in diversity work and attendant normative organizing principles that adhere to constructions of management, including whiteness, colonialism, and able-bodiedness. Further, queer theory can lend a more incisive framing for communication- and practice-centered research on diversity work, ensuring analytical attention to power, discourse, and materiality while also orienting towards new possibilities for identifying, working, and belonging in organizing.

### ***Queer Theory's Interrogations of Sexuality in Organizing***

In their review of queer theorizing in organization studies, Pullen and colleagues (2016) admit that the field's engagement with queer theories is "sporadic, marginal and ambivalent" (p. 1). Within the study of organizational diversity work, queer theorizing is even harder to come by, with only a handful of scholars seeking to explicitly draw upon queer theorizing (Bendl et al., 2008; Bendl et al., 2009; Bendl & Hoffmann, 2015). Bendl and others (2008) provide an initial foray into queering diversity work, arguing that diversity management research and practices perpetuate organizational heteronormativity and binary thinking by relying upon essentialist and stable identity categories. Broadly, Rumens and colleagues (2018) note that queer theorizing provides a necessary corrective to normative tendencies in diversity management discourses, serving as a "deconstructive mode of critique that enables difference and diversity to be rearticulated and, potentially, lived in alternative ways that undermine the essentialist logic of

diversity management discourse” (p. 59). For the authors, this entails shifting attention away from marginalized sexual identities in diversity work and towards an interrogation and queering of heterosexuality, in part by recuperating non-normative forms of heterosexuality in organizing as a means of further critiquing heteronormativity (Rumens et al., 2018).

Other organizational scholars have used similarly deconstructive approaches to identity in their queer analyses of diversity work. Document analysis provides a primary mode of investigation for such inquiry, revealing that codes of conduct maintain and reinforce organizational heteronormativity (Bendl et al., 2009; Bendl & Hofmann, 2015) and diversity statements often erase queer subjectivities altogether (Morrish & O’Mara, 2011). Utilizing qualitative data collection to examine discursive practices in Italian organizations, Priola and others (2018) find that heteronormativity prevails in organizations, despite discourses of inclusion and legal protection for sexual identities: “LGBTQ employees who regulate themselves to fit in the normative standards are included, while those who fail in self-censuring their diversity remain under-included or even excluded” (p. 748). In these cases, heteronormativity serves to regulate organizational identities, and provides an oppressive environment for LGBTQ organizational members.

Notably, the queer diversity work literature reviewed above, scant as it is, largely focuses on examining norms and identities related to sexuality. This is indicative of the subfield of diversity work, wherein the limited studies that do take up queer theory tend to focus on either “individual experiences and identity of sexual minorities within organizations” or “how organizations are dealing with ‘sexual orientation’ and ‘sexual identities’” (Bendl & Hofmann, 2015, p. 200). In either case, queer theory’s contributions as an analytic remain harnessed on interrogating questions of sexual identity and heteronormativity in diversity management (Bendl

et al., 2008). More recently, Nkomo and others (2019), in their reflections on future directions of diversity research in the field of management, only mention queer theorizing once, and solely in relation to gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity: “Queer theory assists in moving past binary conceptions of gender and allows theorizing on the constitutive connection between and among sex, gender, and sexuality in manifesting heteronormativity in the workplace” (p. 511).

To be sure, queer theorizing focused on minoritized identities is critically important given the dearth of nonheterosexual subjectivities, and the near total absence of gender identity, in diversity work literature (Ozturk & Tatli, 2016). The impacts of such erasures in the organizational imaginary of researchers and practitioners cannot be dismissed. Such absences lead to scholarship and theories of organizing and diversity work that reinstate erasures or violent misreadings of the people implicated in work: “[diversity management] discourse shows that theoretical concepts and strategies often neglect issues of ‘sexual orientation’ or ‘sexuality’, and unwittingly reinforce patterns of exclusion in organizational practice” (Bendl & Hofmann, 2015, p. 196). Bringing sexuality to the fore, including queer, non-normative sexual subjectivities, can serve as an important corrective to this silence.

And yet, the absence of queer theorizing in diversity work that extends beyond interrogating sexual identity is conspicuous given how scholars in the field readily discuss queer theorizing as an important means of interrogating normativity writ large. To this end, I argue that queer theory’s potential as an analytic lies in moving beyond interrogating sexuality and heteronormativity. In calling for a queer approach to ethnographic methodologies in organization studies, McDonald (2017) argues that “much more than identity categories can be queered,” and that queering should encompass “a whole host of normative societal constructs” (p.134). Normative logics like whiteness, coloniality, able-bodiedness and cisnormativity, and their

dynamic interweaving with heteronormativity, undoubtedly punctuate work and organizational life, and constitute important areas for inquiry for queer theorizing. The relative dearth of diversity work literature mobilizing queer theorizing's anti-normative approach beyond sexuality therefore suggests an urgent opportunity for extending queer interventions in the subfield.

### ***Developing a Queer Norm-Critical Stance towards Diversity Work***

In shifting queer analysis away from sexual minority identities, McDonald (2015) highlights queer theory's analytical strengths of foregrounding normativity for inquiry rather than identity, using an anticategorical approach, and embracing a politics of change. In reviewing the limited queer literature on diversity work, I build upon McDonald's (2015) framework in arguing that queer approaches to diversity work can productively 1) draw upon *normativity* as a site of critical organizational inquiry, 2) examine how norms emerge *in practice*, rather than assume a priori that norms necessarily arise and act upon a scene in identical ways, and 3) engage in *coalitional* work with critical approaches outside of queer theory in order to contend with history and context in organizing. Taken together, this queer framework has an ability to both deconstruct harmful normalizing logics while also attending to material concerns and changes, making good on Zanoni and others' (2010) "plea for diversity studies that actively search for new, emancipating forms of organizing" (p. 19).

Several studies pursuing a vein of broader norm-critique in diversity work provide hopeful directions for queer theorizing that stretch beyond interrogating heteronormativity. Just and Christiansen (2012) explore how diversity work discourses in organizational diversity statements shape opportunities for agency and identity in constituting subject positions. The authors find that such discourses single out particular organizational members as "subjects of diversity" who are positioned outside of the norm, with limited opportunities for agency and

identity within diversity management discourses (Just & Christiansen, 2012, p. 322). Holck and Muhr (2017) extend this work in proposing a norm-critical approach to diversity work, which “seeks to move beyond and transcend both diversity management praise of differences and the critical stance advocating the pre-imposed hierarchical relationship between ethnicities, sexes, etc.” (p. 10). For the authors, a norm-critical approach involves questioning taken for granted assumptions and creatively transcending binaries in “a continuous act of norm-critical resistance” (Holck & Muhr, 2017, p. 10). Instead of fixing attention to organizational members coded as diverse, a norm-critical approach interrogates and unravels normative ways of working that establish particular social hierarchies: “By broadening the norms of competencies and allowing multiple identities to counter societal understandings of ethnic minorities, the majority norm of the ideal worker in the organization can be confronted and destabilized” (Holck & Muhr, 2017, p. 10). In this context, critical inquiry shifts to norms of workplace competencies rather than identities coded as “diverse,” disrupting constructions of a diverse/non-diverse binary and the values that adhere to them in the process.

Building off of the norm-critique framework proposed by Holck and Muhr (2017), Christensen (2018) argues that queer organizing must be resolutely anti-normative in “continuously challenging the explicit and implicit norms that underlie organisational practices and that structure social relations, standards and expectations” (p. 106). Accordingly, Christensen (2018) calls for researchers to “move beyond objectifying categories and, in their place, explicate the social relations – the norms – that rule people’s knowing and doing in organisational settings” (p. 106). In this context, norms are “rules and expectations that become precepts for behaviour... They come to function as self-evident ways of doing things in particular situations and have implications for identity construction” (Christensen, 2018, p. 111).

Crucially, in the context of organizing, norms have the power to operate as “structuring mechanisms of organization” (Christensen, 2018, p. 111).

Grounded in this anti-normative approach, Christensen (2018) theorizes queer as a performative mode of doing that has the ability to unseat norms from their naturalized position of “business as usual.” Queering practices therefore provides an opportunity to alter existing organizational power relations. Note how Christensen (2018) specifically frames normativity and queer in terms of practice, emphasizing embodiment in a way that implies both the discursive and the material. In the context of a diversity training session, this can include discussing terminology that points to normative identities rather than marginalized ones, as well as reflecting on self-identity markers and how they do, or do not, align with participants’ personal experiences and self-conceptualizations (Christensen, 2018). An anti-normative approach therefore has the capacity to move beyond and extend existing queer theorizing related to diversity work, calling a researcher’s attention to the ways in which naturalized norms structure organizing via practice.

The norm-critical work above provides insights into how a queer approach might help interrogate normative regimes in organizing while also attending to practice. However, this work seems to operate in isolation from other critical analytical and contextual frameworks that might make a queer anti-normative analysis more incisive. For example, Nkomo and Al Ariss (2014) identify white privilege, colonialism, and racialization as an integral part of the development of modern organizing and managerialism. Faria (2015) utilizes decolonial theory to understand how Eurocentric modes of organizing proliferate an organizational status quo that forecloses other ways of doing and being, and Cruz and Sodeke (2020) note that organizational actors in the

Global South are often “framed as being ‘outside of organization’ or incapable of organizing” (p. 2).

Queer theorizing in diversity work, a literature that explicitly seeks to address organizational inequities and oppression, ignores existing critical frameworks for understanding normative organizational logics like whiteness and coloniality at its own peril. Otherwise, normativity becomes such a large frame of inquiry that queer theorizing might unintentionally perpetuate normative logics while attempting to mobilize norm critique. Scholars have noted that the normalizing regime of whiteness, for example, is often reified in queer theorizing when not explicitly named and addressed (McDonald, 2015). To this end, Cohen (1997) provides important critiques of queer omissions of race, class, and other vectors of oppression that arise from normativity and proximities to power. Rather than sacrificing the “purity” of a queer critique, Pereira (2019) contends that queer theory’s ability to travel and find opportunities of confluence with other critical frameworks renders queering productively “impure and improbable” (p. 404). For Pereira (2019), this includes tracing the generative encounter of decolonial and queer theorizing that speaks specifically from the positionality of the Global South.

I argue that such confluences sharpen queer possibilities for normative critique in organizational diversity work. An emphasis on heteronormativity in diversity work literature suggests that normativity at large remains underexplored in interrogating diversity work. In taking on an anti-normative stance, queer theorizing must actively counteract theoretical solipsism and orient towards a coalitional approach with other critical frameworks that allows for interrogations of normative regimes like whiteness, coloniality, cisheteropatriarchy, and able-bodied privilege. Norm-critique approaches that do not specifically engage existing critical



analytics and normative regimes like whiteness and coloniality may risk attending to organizational normativity as though it existed in a historical and contextual vacuum. Queer theory's insistence on radical and perpetual critique implicates apprehending norms as a means of stretching the possibilities for queering diversity work, and by extension, organizing itself.

Some of these coalitional paths are well-worn, while others remain nascent, particularly within organizational studies. For example, while not necessarily referencing queer theory, Liu (2017) nonetheless takes a norm-critical approach in conducting a qualitative interview study of cisgender Chinese men living in Australia. Liu's (2017) empirical research uncovers how Chinese professionals subvert normative and hegemonic constructions of masculinity through notions of sensuality. By centering norms of masculinity as a crucial part of her analytical inquiry, Liu (2017) troubles familiar normative discourses of white and "Asian" masculinities to uncover new possibilities for subjectivity in the embodied realm of the working professional.

In response to existing literature in organizational communication and diversity management, I therefore mobilize a queer lens that 1) takes up normativity as a site of critical inquiry in organizing, 2) attends to norms as they arise in practice, so as to avoid applying a totalizing worldview that assumes how norms emerge and shape organizational activity in situ, and 3) engages coalitionally with other critical approaches as a means of more adequately contending with organizational histories and contexts.

### ***Towards Queering Diversity Work Research***

Taken together, this review of literature reveals that a queer orientation towards normativity in diversity work, one that attends to practice and engages coalitional critiques of normative regimes, has the potential to radically disrupt diversity work as it is currently conceptualized as an object of study in management and organization studies. Difference studies

in organizational communication provides a helpful framing of communication, organizing, and power that assists in reorienting diversity management efforts, which tend to struggle in moving beyond an analytical focus on the business case of diversity and managerialism. Organizational communication's limited inroads into diversity work suggest opportunities exist to interrogate more intentionally power and the complex interweaving of both the discursive and material at play in the embodied practice of diversity work. Queer theorizing, nascent in the field of organizational communication, provides an analytical approach that is up to the task of attending to power and practice in diversity work, particularly in its ability to address and interrogate organizational norms.

Queering diversity work means unseating taken for granted assumptions about management's central role in diversity work, for example. It means understanding whiteness, colonialism, patriarchy, and able-bodiedness as organizing norms that shape what diversity work can and cannot be in organizational contexts. Ultimately, queering diversity work means rupturing assumptions that undergird existing worldviews so that new subjectivities, new ways of organizing, and new enactments of diversity, equity, and inclusion might be given the opportunity to take root, and flourish. In the spirit of seeking to surface and interrogate taken for granted norms that adhere to enactments of diversity work, I grounded this study in the following research questions:

RQ1: How do participants of organizational diversity work make sense of what counts as normative in diversity work?

RQ2: What norms of practice emerge in the enactment of diversity work?

RQ3: How do normative practices influence diversity's work ability to alter relations of oppression and inequality in organizing?

## Methodology

In keeping with a queer approach to diversity work, this project mobilizes queer theorizing as a methodological orientation in conducting a qualitative study of organizational diversity work. Similar to Mutsaers and Trux (2015), I draw upon ethnographic sensibilities as a means to best capture the ways in which organizational members take up, respond to, resist, and morph material and discursive constructions of diversity work. An ethnographic impulse that is sensitive to contextual variance and participants' understandings can help drive a researcher to learn "What diversity (management) actually means to people" (Mutsaers & Trux, 2015, p. 321).

Within organizational ethnographic research, scholars have begun to outline the importance of queer methods, and participant observation in particular, though few empirical studies exist to test these approaches (McDonald, 2017). McDonald (2017) argues that queering organizational ethnographic approaches includes "questioning normative research practices, illustrating the fluidity of identities and experiences, [and] adopting an anticategorical approach to identity" (p. 141). I address this dearth in queer methodologies by drawing upon the metaphor of a kaleidoscope as a generative heuristic that centers a norm-critical approach to qualitative research.

### Kaleidoscope as Queer Methodology

In this section I outline kaleidoscope as a means of mobilizing the queer approach to diversity work outlined above in the literature review. Kaleidoscope as a queer research methodology encourages fixing attention to *norms and normativity* in organizing via the study of *situated practices*, to understand how norms emerge in situ and interpenetrate with *historical and contextual* normative regimes like whiteness and coloniality to shape organizational realities.

As a metaphor for queer approaches to research, kaleidoscope in part builds off of Ellingson's (2014) notion of crystallization, which she describes as "a framework for conducting qualitative and mixed-method research that invites researchers to examine relational topics using multiple lenses and a variety of genres" (p. 442). Spanning across epistemological paradigms, crystallization produces complex understandings of an object of study through multiple modes of qualitative research, presenting data in varied representational forms that prompt researcher reflexivity and reject singular, "true" readings of a phenomenon (Ellingson, 2014). Whereas the post-positivist notion of triangulation seeks "to use multiple types and sources of data, diverse methods of collection, various theoretical frames, and multiple researchers in order to settle upon what is 'really' happening" (Tracy, 2013, p. 40), crystallization makes important advances by eschewing the possibility of ever "finding convergence on a single reality" (Tracy, 2013, p. 236).

The facets of a crystallization framework are amenable to queer sensibilities, particularly in how crystallization emphasizes the many ways of not just collecting data, but also presenting research to a variety of audiences. Yet, crystallization's focus on varied types of data collection and presentations foregrounds modes of *representation*, while potentially leaving the dynamic relations at play in organizing under addressed. Kaleidoscope as queer methodology principally seeks to foreground *norms and their relations* in constituting organizing, rather than modes of representing organizational data. Rather than treating all norms as inherently oppressive, kaleidoscope treats norms as a critical site of inquiry, and a means of uncovering how expectations, assumptions, and naturalized ways of being and working become "precepts for behavior" and "structuring mechanisms" in organizing (Christensen, 2018, p. 111). Such an investigation may reveal some norms as productive of fostering equitable and anti-oppressive

organizing practices, even as it finds others that collude with logics of whiteness and coloniality to limit and crowd out other ways of being.

In doing so, kaleidoscope shifts inquiry to ever-evolving practices and the localized understandings to which they adhere, in order to better trace how norms emerge and shape organizational reality as “a complex and ongoing accomplishment” (Kuhn, 2020, p. 2). Here, I understand practices to be “real-time doings and sayings, mediated by the way discourse, materiality, and our bodies are entangled” (Janssens & Steyaert, 2019, p. 530). These situated ways of doing and saying comprise social worlds, forming particular social orders that can always be made otherwise. In utilizing a kaleidoscope methodology, the researcher is therefore acutely attuned to the way norms provide a point of focus, while also holding in tension a larger field of organizing dynamics and interpenetrating normative regimes like whiteness and coloniality. A single point of entry therefore leads to a fractured, dynamic, and contextualized view of organizing, one that lends itself to sustained inquiry into how norms arise out of and shape daily practice in ways that materially impact organizational members.

Communication plays a fundamental role in a kaleidoscopic approach that attends to norms inherent in organizational practices. Kuhn (2020) argues that practice itself might be productively reframed as communication, wherein communication becomes “the practice through which a variety of elements enter into relationship, and it is from such relations that realities materialize” (p. 4). A kaleidoscopic approach can therefore serve as a communicative methodological lens for qualitative research, and a means for understanding how norms arise out of communication in ways that shape the material and representational configurations of organizational realities. As a result, norms are understood to be situated; that is, norms act upon a scene via communication in varied and contingent ways that must necessarily eschew definitive

maxims, even as the researcher looks for resonances with historical and contextual logics like whiteness and coloniality. Norms do not necessarily arise and function organizationally in the same way to challenge or reify normative logics, and their valence cannot be taken for granted a priori by a researcher.

The metaphor of kaleidoscope, with its focus on norms, relational practices, and attention to historical and contextual logics like whiteness and coloniality, facilitates an approach to qualitative research that is uniquely amenable to queer sensibilities, and can even help to address potential limitations that researchers might encounter when mobilizing queer theory as methodology. Kaleidoscope is particularly well-suited to interrogating normativity in organizational diversity work. A queer approach entails a “resolutely anti-normative mode of politics” that “interrogates and seeks to transform social norms and relations of power” (Rumens et al., 2018, p. 594). The metaphor of kaleidoscope involves a commitment to interrogating the political consequences of social orders produced via practice, with an orientation towards a queer otherwise that disrupts normative attempts to foreclose other ways of being. Kaleidoscope as queer methodology allows researchers to see norms not as something immutable, but as a part of a shifting plane capable of providing “powerful insight to what it means to live, love, think, and act outside constructions of the norm” (Madison, 2012, p. 80). Holding onto this capacity for surprise and dynamism helps a researcher orient towards a queer “ontological multiplicity” comprised of “infinite becomings of difference” in the research process (Ashcraft & Muhr, 2018, p. 217). Such an approach pushes researchers to delay conclusions about things as they appear during data collection, and persistently challenge ontological assumptions and entified constructions that arise in the research process.

An ability to interrogate normativity via practice provides an opportunity to extend and address potential limitations in nascent queer approaches to qualitative research. As mentioned in the literature review above, when queer theorists say they are engaging in an anti-normative stance, normativity becomes such a large category of analysis that scholars leave themselves open to reenacting their own biases and ways of seeing (i.e., only addressing certain forms of normativity in certain contexts and in certain ways). Kaleidoscope introduces a means of interrogating normativity that can address the sometimes ambiguous or overly general status of normativity as a locus of study. Rather than lose specificity, a kaleidoscope approach reaches a precise and granular level of inquiry, focusing on and toggling between points of precision in order to trace relational dynamics. Further, an ability to widen this lens to identify resonances with other harmful normative logics provides an approach that is incisive and generative in its ability to communicatively examine normative social orders.

A critical part of these organizational entanglements is the research process itself. Acknowledging researcher positionality is an important part of critical approaches to qualitative research, including those informed by queer sensibilities. McDonald (2013) introduces the notion of queer reflexivity in qualitative research, which entails an anticategorical, dynamic, and contextual approach to identity. McDonald (2013) argues that the identities of researchers and participants alike should never be taken for granted in a study. Attention to practice under a kaleidoscopic approach similarly cautions against taking for granted the positionalities of researchers, participants, and objects of study, which are understood as constantly shifting and constituted through research practices. Such research practices themselves become a part of the organizational scene, requiring a researcher to inquire as to how their own presence, practices, and associated nonhuman actors (e.g., audio recorders, field journals, laptop computers)

influence what unfolds in terms of data collection and analysis. A practice and relational viewpoint via kaleidoscope reveals that researchers are called into relation just as much as an object of study. When imagining a kaleidoscope as a metaphor for research, one might construct a dispassionate observer training a viewing instrument upon a scene. Instead, kaleidoscope as queer methodology positions the researcher as a part of the relational kaleidoscopic scene, enmeshed in the doings and sayings that abound there.

Certainly, an approach centering around the metaphor of kaleidoscope is not without limitations of its own. Kaleidoscope as a metaphor evokes vision and sight, and as Kavanagh (2004) argues, western philosophies have traditionally vaulted a vision-centric approach to epistemology and ontology which has come to dominate organizational discourses.

Ocularcentrism has played a distinct role in the dualistic construction of subject-object, wherein sight “helps create the belief that objects are distant from and neutrally apprehended by sovereign subjects” (Kavanagh, 2004, p. 448). While any metaphor and methodological approach is inherently partial and limited, I mobilize kaleidoscope from a queer and relational perspective as a means of directly challenging such subject-object dualism. Kaleidoscope as queer methodology can, and must, be turned on itself to critically engage how researchers and their analytical instruments are a part of the shifting relations at work in the research process. My hope is that kaleidoscope’s foregrounding of practice and a relational ontology makes it capable of, and uniquely suited to, dismantling dualisms, allowing for an ability to unlearn and make strange normative constructions that act upon the research process, including researchers and organizations.

In utilizing queer theories that resist definition and categorization, Pascoe (2018) notes that queer ethnography “is a method in tension with itself” (p. 302), favoring multiplicity over



static processes. Rumens (2018) further argues that “...there are no fixed prescriptions about how we might go about queering methodologies and conceive of certain methods and methodologies as queer” (p. 94), and my efforts in this research project in no way suggest categorically how queer ethnographic research ought to be “correctly” done. Instead, I present kaleidoscope as a dynamic heuristic attuned to practice, normativity, and queer reflexivity that is up to the task of addressing the relational complexities of the field and the research process. In the following section, I attempt to put into practice a kaleidoscopic perspective by interweaving autoethnographic, self-reflexive, and scholarly representations in a discussion of my own methodological positionalities and decisions for this research project.

### **Researcher Positioning**

*“We don’t want to waste the Chancellor’s time,” a committee member ventures, “I think we should cancel the meeting since we don’t have anything to ask of him.” I can feel a tightness rise in my throat at hearing this. We are co-chairs of “Chancellor’s advisory committees” representing various social identities – on race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, women, and accessibility – and while many at the table believe we merely advise the Chancellor’s office, I have come to think of our work more as guerrilla institutional advocacy. I feel like I’m becoming the angry, self-righteous queer in the room as I respond, “I have a laundry list of issues that my committee needs the Chancellor’s office to address, and I don’t feel bad about taking up his time with them. If we can’t get our concerns addressed by administrators, then they’re the ones wasting our time, not the other way around.” Flustered, I quiet down after saying this, sensing I’ve somehow become too passionate for the conversation.*

Prior to graduate school, I worked in both the nonprofit sector and higher education for eight years. During that time, I was engaged in volunteer committees that addressed issues of diversity and inclusion. This experience has given me certain levels of insider knowledge about existing diversity work in organizations and allowed me to build relationships with staff and administrators who specifically address diversity work in their roles. As the above personal account suggests, these experiences have also carried with them feelings of exasperation, frustration, and hopelessness related to diversity work. This intimate knowledge and experience

with diversity work means that my ethnographic research could be viewed as a kind of “at-home ethnography,” wherein the researcher is already an active participant in the field site (Alvesson, 2009), with the attendant benefits (e.g., negotiating access, contextual knowledge) and challenges (e.g., sufficient distance from the research subject) that such ethnographic work entails.

*Walking with my friend down Pearl Street, I'm in the middle of animatedly recounting a story to him when a man standing outside of a bar, someone who appears to be a current university student, shouts “fag” at me as I pass. I feel my face blush deeply with embarrassment and surprise, but immediately brush it off as nothing and attempt to continue my story. Luckily, the man says nothing more and doesn't follow us, but the word he spouted does pursue me, lingers in my mind long after we've left the shopping center, after I left the university with my undergraduate degree, after I left Boulder to live elsewhere, after almost 15 years. Here, of all places, the “liberal bastion” of the state, is where I learned that anyone could make me feel small, could make me feel like a target, could make me want to escape back into myself with a single word.*

As a queer-identified white cisgender male with US citizenship, I find myself constantly navigating issues of the closet, privilege, and oppression in the context of organizational settings. Given my own personal struggles with belonging, identity, and community, I have chosen to meaningfully engage in diversity work myself for over ten years. Learning more about diversity work was an impetus for me to return to graduate school, and I have had a consulting business that provides me the opportunity to receive payment for conducting diversity work since 2013. In other words, my identity, personally and professionally, is wrapped up in diversity work, and I am wary of the potential for managerial bias and monetary gain to obscure and cloud my ability to critically engage in ethnographic research.

*I can't believe how heavy the award is: a big glass rectangle with a buffalo etched inside of it. Below it, the plaque recognizes my efforts in diversity work at the university. Like the weight of the award, the fact that I'm receiving it feels absurd. I'm supposed to say a few words, so I speak into the microphone, in front of the audience that includes my supervisor, my dean, and so many other people I have worked with in the college and the university. “Sometimes I think that this work would be so much easier to do if my identity wasn't implicated in it, if in arguing for diversity issues I didn't have to feel like I was*

*also having to argue for my humanity to be seen and recognized as valuable.” I feel so much in this moment, all at once: grateful, lucky, undeserving, humbled, frustrated, but mostly just tired.*

Diversity work continuously cracks me open; I encounter it as alternatively invigorating and exhausting. I reflexively view this connection to my object of study as a bias, certainly, and also as a heuristic born out of embodied critical attunement. In this sense, I cannot separate myself from the organizational phenomenon I seek to study, nor do I believe I should. Rather, I remain deeply invested in sensing how my shifting identities as researcher and practitioner dynamically relate to the study and enactment of diversity work. From a kaleidoscopic perspective, I find myself continually asking: how am I and the varied actors involved made and unmade by engaging in diversity work, inside and outside of a research capacity? My body is therefore an important element of a queered research process that reflects “an understanding of the power and limitations of our own situated identities and partial perspectives as researchers...[and] attention to the affective dimension of experience and knowledge” (Pfeffer, 2018, p. 324).

### **Site Description and Data Collection**

In conducting a multi-sited qualitative research study that examined diversity work, I included activities, roles, and documents defined by organizations themselves as engagements in diversity, equity, and inclusion. My research sites encompassed a variety of organizational contexts, including for profit, nonprofit, and public institutions, with the intention that a greater diversity of institutional forms (i.e., size, industry, and structure) would lend itself to identifying normative practices that emerge across organizational contexts. This multiple-case sampling approach provided a means of examining a range of organizational activities, documents, and positions that were both similar in form and contrasting in context (Miles et al., 2020). In

locating documents, sites for participant observation, and participants for interviews, I utilized my existing contacts in diversity work in Colorado and the United States. Specifically, I used social media and email to solicit participation, and later used snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019) to locate additional participants, documents, and diversity activities. My own engagements in diversity work, current and past, served to knit my relational ties into the research process, inevitably a reflection of my own work as it was of diversity work as an object of study.

As an attempt to gain varied insights and perspectives into the practices and relations that constitute diversity work, I collected the following types of data: fieldnotes taken during participant observations of diversity events, interviews with people whose organizational work was formally tied in some way to diversity work, organizational documents related to diversity work, and autoethnographic accounts of my own experiences engaging in organizational diversity work as a consultant. Participant observations included attending a total of ten events: two diversity work planning committee meetings, four open forums aiming to solicit feedback, and four diversity trainings. The duration of events ranged from 75 minutes to an eight-hour (full day) diversity training, with the average event time being two hours and 45 minutes. Three events were with a nonprofit, two with government institutions, and five at a public higher education institution. While attending these events, I took “scratch notes” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019) as preliminary written notes in a field journal or laptop, depending on what would be the least conspicuous based on what other participants’ actions. These scratch notes provided an opportunity to not only log the proceedings of the diversity activities, but also note the texture of the experience, including tone, mood, affective reactions, and personal responses. I later used these scratch notes to write more detailed field notes that I used for analysis.

I conducted nine one-on-one semi-structured (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019) interviews ranging from 48 minutes to 86 minutes, with the average interview lasting 64 minutes. Four interviewees worked at government institutions, three at for-profit companies, one at a nonprofit, and one at a charter school organization. With the participants' permission, I recorded and later transcribed the interviews, in addition to taking scratch notes during our conversations to write down initial themes or impressions. I asked participants at the beginning of the interview to share what identities were most and least salient for them, as a means of situating the conversation within positionalities stemming from social identities. My interview questions asked participants to identify how they defined diversity work, and how they saw diversity work enacted in their own organizational contexts. I encouraged participants to reflect not just on the definitions and associated practices of diversity work, but also their embodied experience with diversity work, for example asking participants "When you think of DEI work, what do you feel, and where do you feel it on your body?" In keeping with a kaleidoscopic approach, I asked interview questions that attended to the discursive, material, and embodied elements of diversity work practices. See Appendix for the full interview guide that I used to conduct interviews with participants.

Alongside field observations and interviews, I collected 36 documents related to organizational diversity work for analysis. These ranged from planning documents, strategic plans, training information handouts and worksheets, guides related to carrying out diversity work, reports, diversity statements, and organizational announcements of new positions specifically geared towards diversity work. The audiences and settings for these documents similarly ranged from government, nonprofit, education, and for-profit contexts. Finally, during the research process I wrote a total of eight autoethnographic accounts that stemmed from my own consulting business working with organizations on diversity, equity, and inclusion issues.

These accounts were particularly attuned to my own embodied reactions, observations, and emotions that arose as I personally engaged in organizational diversity work.

The resulting data allowed for multiple points of inquiry, not for the sake of representing or seeking know diversity work as a stable entity, but rather in order to better trace relational dynamics at play in diversity work in an attempt understand normative social orders they constructed. In total, the data analyzed for this project included approximately 61 pages of field notes, 151 pages of transcribed interviews, and 10 pages of autoethnographic accounts (single spaced, one-inch margins, Times New Roman font, size 12). The organizational diversity documents varied in terms of format and font, and totaled 186 pages, for a total of 408 pages of qualitative data.

### **Data Analysis**

For the analysis of my data, in my first read-through of the data I conducted a more “traditional” form of coding that included an iterative analysis that “alternates between emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations and theories” (Tracy, 2013, p. 184). Such an approach allowed for an open exploration of the data that also attended to how normativity might be at play in diversity work. This included an initial open coding process informed by my research questions, wherein I coded accounts and practices of diversity work. I followed this open coding with axial coding that attempted to trace connections between code categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019), particularly as they related to normative social relations produced through enactments of diversity work. I created an organic network model (Miles et al., 2020) of these axial codes on blank sheets of paper, using different colors and arrows to denote relationships between codes. This provided an initial, and admittedly crude, means of conducting a kaleidoscopic reading of the data, in terms of identifying norms as points

of inquiry related to diversity work accounts and practices, and tracing the relationships at play in the axial codes. Given that queer methods embrace “an ambivalent stance toward categories” (Pascoe, 2018, p. 298), this organic mapping process allowed me to question and deconstruct codes even as I tentatively and strategically utilized them to further my analysis.

During this first read-through and initial analysis of the data, I also kept brief memos as a means of tracking my “analytic thinking,” which included noting surprising or unexpected examples from the data that did not seem to easily map to the coding I had done thus far (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 314). This was, in part, an attempt to enact the queer practice of promiscuous coding (Ashcraft & Muhr, 2018), which includes embodied attunement, relentless curiosity that can “nurture unsettling surprises” (p. 221), and “a search for multiple, unusual partners, especially those once deemed off limits” (p. 221) among the data. These memos also allowed me to track notable silences that might indicate “that which cannot be said” in an organizational context, which Harding and others (2011) position as a queer practice in data analysis.

In my second full reading of the data, I developed a “codebook” that allowed me to better flesh out the axial coding I had identified in my first reading and the coding map I had created (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 322). My second read-through allowed me to note specific examples from the data that adhered to codes in the codebook. Even at this stage, I attempted to stave off providing comprehensive definitions for axial codes, preferring to further trace the tentative threads I had outlined in my coding map as they added texture to my research questions.

Throughout this second reading of the data, I frequently referred back and added to my initial analysis memos. Alongside this, conversations with my advisor, Dr. Karen Ashcraft, gave me invaluable opportunities to verbally process the data and my initial analyses, in order to better identify more concrete findings that might provide novel contributions to my inquiry of diversity

work. I then conducted a third full reading of the data, paying specific attention to how the data and my coding thus far related to the emergent findings around which my analyses were beginning to coalesce. A kaleidoscopic approach proved to be a valuable heuristic as I conducted this third read-through of the data and transitioned to outlining my analysis section, in particular allowing me to identify specific norms as points of inquiry that seemed foundational to my research questions, and then tracing the varied relations at play among the data from these points. As I progressed in writing my analysis section, I frequently returned to the codebook and the original data itself, adding to and amending the codebook in bulleted format when I identified new and relevant examples and insights from the data. By the end of writing my analysis section, the codebook totaled a little over 101 pages (single spaced, Times New Roman font, size 12).

Finally, I coordinated member reflection dialogues ranging from 45-60 minutes with five of my interview participants, which served as opportunities for “reflexive elaboration” on my initial findings (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). All participants expressed that their experiences were accurately reflected in my analysis and then added additional examples of how they saw my findings showing up in their own work. These conversations also unexpectedly renewed my affective connections with the participants, with one suggesting that I present my findings to the organization at a later date. In this sense, kaleidoscopic reflexivity prompts me to continually inquire after who I am becoming as a researcher, practitioner, and even participant in relation to my research project, writing, and evolving relationships with others.

Taken together, this process of data collection and analysis attempted to enact queer organizational qualitative research, integrating a queer sensibility in the practice of conducting and analyzing my research. The metaphor of kaleidoscope served as an important means of mobilizing such queer sensibilities while also attending to norms and practices associated with



diversity work. As I explain in the following section, the metaphor of kaleidoscope also informs the mode of writing and conveying my analysis.

### **Analysis**

Motivated by a queer inclination towards interrogating normativity, the research questions animating this analysis center around 1) how participants of diversity work make sense of what counts as normal in diversity work, 2) what norms of practice emerge in enactments of diversity work, and finally 3) how normative practices influence diversity work's ability to alter relations of oppression and inequity. As a research method, mode of data analysis, and means of explication, I draw upon a kaleidoscopic approach to address these questions not in turn, but rather in concert. Doing so allows for an understanding of sensemaking, practice, and social relations in diversity work as deeply interwoven and co-constitutive.

Each analysis section therefore begins by drawing upon a different metaphor normatively associated with diversity work that emerged from the data as an important sensemaking device for participants: journey, container, and table (RQ1). I draw upon metaphors here as meaning-making abstractions that implicate “deep-level assumptions and ideological roots” underlying approaches to diversity work (Putnam & Boys, 2006, p. 543). As Putnam and Boys (2006) argue, metaphors “establish figure-ground relationships” that can provide an important window into organizing, and in this case, diversity work (p. 542). Fixing kaleidoscopic attention to metaphors as an entry point, I extend analytic attention to norms of practice in diversity work that adhere to the three metaphors, respectively: trainings, data collection, and positional leadership (RQ2). Similar to Janssens and Steyaert (2019), I move beyond a commonsensical approach in understanding practices to be a way of doing that is “simultaneously discursive, embodied, and material” (p. 523). Rather than attempting to define the substance of each practice as a stable

entity, the analysis instead seeks to understand practices as a mode or way of doing that is dynamic, and that can always be otherwise (Janssens & Steyaert, 2019). While many diversity work practices coalesce around the metaphors of journey, container, and table, I focus on a particular practice that exhibited a strong adherence to each metaphor as a means of achieving a finer-grained tracing of the relationships between normative sensemaking and practice in diversity work. I then explore how the intertwining of sensemaking and practice contribute to particular social relations in diversity work that may challenge or reinforce relations of inequity in organizing (RQ3).

As I present the three metaphorical foci, tracing their associated practices and social relations in each section, I also attempt to gradually widen the kaleidoscopic lens in progressing across the analysis sections. The resulting analysis interrogates the relationships between metaphorical objects and the relational clusters they activate – how the journey, container, and table orient to each other – and examines how the resulting dynamic configurations themselves produce particular social relations in diversity work. To be clear, I analyze the relationships between metaphors, practices, and social relations as a means of analysis, not of determining causality. Metaphors do not themselves cause practices and social orders, but rather serve as an analytical entry point for identifying and tracing relations at play in diversity work.

Overall, I argue that diversity work normatively situates the organization and individual as discrete and separate entities, inscribing various divisions between the two that limit a capacity for agency and therefore reify existing inequitable social relations in organizing. I first turn to the metaphor of the journey and training practices, which cleave humans from nonhuman actors in such a way that diversity work becomes an individualized and personal endeavor. I next outline the metaphor of container and practices of data collection, which relegate the

organization to the background, responsible for providing the ideal conditions for the personal journey. The notion of a designed container foregrounds a need for continuous assessment in diversity work, enacting a politics of measurement that differentially scrutinize organizational members based on diversity categories. Finally, I argue that the metaphorical table operates as an attempted meeting point between organization and human actor: an organizational imaginary that uncovers the ways diversity work enshrines leadership and fosters inequitable relations of dependency and access.

Taken together, these kaleidoscopic insights portray diversity work as spotlighting the individual and framing the organization as an accessory to personal development. This bifurcation of the organization and individual, and the various ways in which it arises and produces emerging effects in diversity work, ensures that diversity work remains “inside” the container that is considered the organization, but also outside what is considered organizational in terms of day-to-day work. This compartmentalization of diversity work and a preoccupation with positional leadership limits opportunities for organizational engagement in diversity work and places the onus of diversity work squarely on organizational members, a labor that differentially falls upon bodies marked as diverse. In such an arrangement, the organization and other agential forces implicated in organizing fall away from view as consequential but still secondary to the primary task of changing people’s hearts and minds. Relations enacted in diversity work therefore limit agential possibilities implicated in organizing and stymie lasting organizational change towards equity and anti-oppression.

The aim of this analysis is not to critique diversity work out of existence (as if such a thing were possible), or to frame diversity work as hopelessly doomed to perpetuate the very inequities it seeks to address. Diversity work’s operation from an individualistic stance hardly

makes the practice unique in a world dominated by capitalism and modernism, where western epistemological and ontological logics foreground the human subject while also situating that subject under “the supremacy of the Organization” (Mignolo, 2007, p. 505). As Ibarra-Colado (2006) argues, such logics operate as often unchallenged organizational norms, and enact their own disciplinary politics: “we forget too easily that the operation of organizing and governing, their rules and instrumentation, has serious practical consequences. They are disciplinary mechanisms producing certain effects that promote specific forms of social distribution” (p. 473). The following analysis reveals that diversity work must more consciously name and address such normative individualizing logics, in order to expand notions of agency and better strive for an equitable and anti-oppressive politics. Diversity work can, and must, be otherwise.

### **On the Journey: Trainings and the Personalization of Diversity Work**

Following traces of the metaphorical journey and training practices reveals how diversity work separates humans from nonhuman actors, ultimately spotlighting organizational members as the main event. This ontological bifurcation produces diversity work as an individual, personalized, and often internal endeavor, the implications of which spill out into a range of emergent effects and additional divisions in organizing. In particular, a personalization of diversity work 1) helps to produce a bifurcation of work, wherein diversity work is compartmentalized and set apart from other organizational activities, and 2) shapes expertise in ways that adhere to the embodiment of identities understood as “diverse,” contributing to a bifurcation of expertise that separates embodied expertise from organizational expertise. Such divisions in work and expertise help to ensure that embodied diversity remains largely segmented and siloed from other organizing activities, and that organizational inequities based on identity persist in organizing.

The journey appears as a conceptual reference point for making sense of diversity work, one that instills consequential “figure-ground relationships” in organizing (Putnam & Boys, 2006, p. 542). In my interview with Marilyn, a senior program manager for inclusion recruiting at a large multinational company, she draws upon notions of a journey in talking about the best parts of diversity work:

**Sean:** From your perspective, what’s the best part of DEI work?

**Marilyn:** It’s watching the change happen, right? It’s watching people hit different levels in their journey and say, I get it now, like I actually get it...it’s those light bulb moments of authentic buy-in that I find most rewarding because when people get it, like, really get it, then the work, you know, the work is advancing. (I6-9)

Marilyn’s portrayal of diversity work evokes the journey as a developmental process, one that instigates personal change in an upward trajectory. In this portrayal, diversity work itself, invoked as “the work,” advances through individual human achievements along this journey, and requires “authentic buy-in.” By zeroing in on individual advancement along an evolutionary path, the journey helps to reveal how diversity work foregrounds human actors, producing an ontological bifurcation that separates humans from nonhuman actors in organizing. The foregrounding of human actors relegates nonhuman entities to the background, and ensures human actors remain the primary locus of concern. The journey therefore illuminates a mode of diversity work that is individual, personal, and ultimately a story of human development.

Diversity training alights around the metaphorical journey as a practice that operates from and furthers an individualizing logic in diversity work. As one multinational consulting firm specializing in diversity work notes in a 2018 publication, trainings are a ubiquitous hallmark of organizational engagement in diversity work: “Training is the most popular solution to increase workforce diversity. Research shows that nearly one-half of the midsize companies in the United States mandate diversity training, as do nearly all the Fortune 500” (D18-9). As a common

practice in diversity work, trainings often contribute to initiating, continuing, and benchmarking progress along an individual's personal journey in diversity work.

### ***Trainings and Personalizing Diversity Work***

Diversity work trainings are themselves made up of a variety of activities that can serve to further the figure-ground relationships illuminated by the metaphor of the journey, wherein an ontological bifurcation frames diversity work as a human and personal endeavor. For example, during a business's internal staff training, the facilitator began with an "icebreaker" activity that asked people to stand up, move around the room, find a partner, and discuss questions that included "What is a value that you got from someone growing up?" and "What is a value that you have had to unlearn" (F3-2). After this activity, the facilitator asked everyone to return to their seats: "[the facilitator] says that she hopes this training is about creating 'a warm container we can pour ourselves into,' and 'a space where we find out who we are'" (F3-2). In setting the tone for the training, this initial activity suggests a journey that is thoroughly individual and personal, wherein training participants reflect on values outside the context of work or organizational activity. The comments that followed the activity, where the facilitator framed the session as "a space where we find out who we are," similarly fashions diversity work as a personal journey of discovery. Note here that the comment directs participants inward (i.e., "Who am I?"), rather than towards other lines of inquiry that might challenge ontological assumptions of the individual and organizations as bounded entities (for example, "What is the thing we come to know as organization, and how does it influence issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion?" or "How do I come to understand myself in relation to ideas about organization and organizing?"). Framing diversity work as an internal, personal endeavor therefore helps to

obscure other means of engaging in diversity work that take seriously the implications of other actors and other relations that might be perpetuating inequities in organizing.

Autoethnographic reflections of my own diversity work training facilitations also reveal initial training activities as initiating an internal and personal journey. A PowerPoint presentation for a training I conducted was entitled “Start with the Self” (A8), and a handout prompted attendees to reflect on personal experiences that related to the ideas of belonging and inclusion. From the outset, participants are asked to foreground personal values and beliefs as the primary site of inquiry, rather than seeing human actors as enmeshed among a variety of human and nonhuman actors.

The turn inward facilitated by an ontological bifurcation in turn individualizes potential action and change in diversity work. At a diversity and inclusion session at a large higher education institution, a worksheet with the header “Personalizing the [Diversity, Inclusion, and Academic Excellence] Plan” tells participants:

There are three overarching goals that define the recommendations within the [Diversity, Inclusion, and Academic Excellence] Plan. In this session, you are invited to map out how you connect to the three goals in specific, actionable language. We encourage you to approach this work with a growth mindset: stay open, positive, and interested in new ideas. (D8)

Alongside the three goals, the worksheet prompts participants to answer the following questions: “What do I personally know? What do I need to know? What is currently happening in my unit/dept.? What can I make happen?” (D8). The handout explicitly evokes notions of personalizing diversity work, and primes participants for a journey of individual development by encouraging a “growth mindset.” This growth, and a personal journey inward, translates to an individualized notion of, and responsibility for, action and change, where the worksheet calls organizational members to reflect specifically upon the question “What can I make happen?”

Evaluations or feedback forms that come at the end of a training also evince diversity work's focus on individualized action. During field observations of a diversity and inclusion training session in a higher education setting, a feedback form included the following two questions that asked for a numerical response on a scale from one to five: "This session gave me skills or ideas to take action to further diversity and inclusion" and "This session was valuable to me and the work I do" (F6-13). The feedback form also included a short answer question: "What have you been inspired to address now that you have attended this session?" (F6-13). These questions encourage participants to evaluate the training based on its ability to convey skills that are of personal value and use in individually advancing diversity work, and to inspire action in attendees. Feedback forms here set the terms by which training practices can be evaluated, foreclosing sensemaking of diversity work that might extend beyond that of the personal journey of human development. Organizational members are ultimately framed as the principal means to "further diversity and inclusion," and feedback forms, alongside other training practices, hold them accountable to this role while minimizing the importance of other organizational dynamics.

The examples above provide a fuller picture of the texture of diversity work trainings vis a vis practice: the way facilitators, handouts, bodies, feedback forms, and PowerPoint slides, among many other dynamic actors, initiate participants into undertaking a personal journey of the mind and heart. Acknowledging this varied cast of actors, many of them nonhuman, reveals diversity work and organizing writ large to be a more complex, relational endeavor, even as such practices obscure their constitutive force by ontologically separating and spotlighting the human actor. Framing diversity work as a personal journey, with attendant activities that operate from the individual as the locus of concern, therefore hinders an interrogation of practices, dynamics, and entities outside of the individual and personal growth. Instead, a personalization of diversity



work animates relations of authenticity and accountability that can further silo diversity work as separate from other organizational activities.

### *Staying Authentic, Accountable, and Isolated*

The ontological bifurcation of the human actor from nonhuman actors facilitated by the metaphorical journey and training practices contributes to a formation of diversity work that is fixated on authenticity, personal motivation, and accountability. Such relations lead to an additional division: the compartmentalization of diversity work as separate from other organizational activities.

Diversity work participants and practitioners often cited authenticity in relation to engagement in diversity work. As CSC, a volunteer member of an organizational diversity, inclusion, and equity committee, noted: “if you are going to really do this work authentically, then that’s because you have done this work internally. And that for me kind of like elevates you to different levels” (I4-7). Such notions of authenticity spring from a personalization of diversity work that the metaphorical journey and trainings help to instantiate. In field notes taken at one company that recently underwent a day-long training with their staff, the organization’s diversity and inclusion committee discussed how some members of the staff seemed to be resistant to what the training facilitators covered. In response to this, the committee discussed having follow-up conversations where staff members could share testimonials about their own personal investment in diversity work, or their “why” statement: “people who want to lead it can say their ‘why’ statement and sit in on an open session that they oversee...this would be a way to engage other people” (F1-9). This statement prompts committee members to begin sharing their “why” statements in the meeting with one another, as preparation for the training debrief conversations. One member volunteers: “mine is social justice, it is what it is” (F1-9). The committee head,

pointing to another member of the group, suggests another example for a “why” statement: “you don’t have to say this, but maybe yours is your personal growth in this.” Afterward, she notes: “I’m looking to grapple with my own racist behavior, I’m in it for my own education, and I’m going through my own work in this process” (F1-9).

These “why” statements, in this case a reaction to perceived resistance to diversity work in a training setting, reveal how authenticity becomes a kind of currency in diversity work, proof that an individual is truly “on the path” and personally believes in what diversity work is trying to accomplish. Further, stumbling blocks or obstacles encountered in diversity work are often understood within the confines of the personal journey as a sensemaking device: if diversity work is *not* advancing, it must be because of personal problems like moral deficiency, resistance, or inauthentic engagement.

Diversity work fashioned along a personal journey therefore becomes about authenticity, a question of earnest personal investment and internal engagement, that detracts from seeing how organizing itself might be implicated in inhibiting diversity work. This personalization and internalization prompted by authenticity serves to compartmentalize diversity work among other organizational activities. Queen, the head of a governmental department that has spearheaded diversity and inclusion efforts, notes how the personal element of diversity work makes it unique and different from other aspects of work:

...there is the personal energy that goes into [diversity work]. I mean, this is very difficult work. And, and you’re, you know, there are many things in terms of your professional job that- when people say it is not personal choice; not personal if you’re working and talking about a budget or, you know, talking about a program, maybe. But I think this is always personal. So I think it’s the personal energy that it requires and the fact that you, by the nature of the work, you are always vulnerable. (I8-8)

Queen indicates that the journey of diversity work, which implicates authenticity, involves personal and emotional investment in ways that other organizational activities such as

budgeting and programming do not. The personal realm of the journey estranges diversity work from day-to-day organizational activity, and reinforces the notion that other organizational activities are normatively impersonal, rendering authenticity irrelevant and unnecessary in those settings. The practice of bringing in outside consultants to conduct trainings and engage in diversity work can inadvertently further silo diversity work as emotional, personal, and therefore outside of what is considered organizational activity. During field observations of a panel event for nonprofit organizations entitled “Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) 101,” one panelist discusses the vulnerability required of diversity work alongside a need for consulting:

“consultants and trainers are valuable, and in most cases necessary for EDI work” (F8-5).

Diversity training, often undertaken by an outside consultant, serves as a means to prompt and shepherd members along a personal journey while also preserving a veneer of professional decorum elsewhere in the organization. The contrast of diversity work as personal, authentic, and emotional against other organizational activities cast as objective and professional contributes to a bifurcation of work, separating diversity work from day-to-day organizational activity.

Within a framework of authenticity, diversity work holds organizational members accountable for their own internal development and growth. Specific skills covered in diversity trainings become new accountability measures for participants: as one institution’s diversity and inclusion strategic plan states, “The ultimate aim is to provide the knowledge, skills, and abilities that result in personal accountability and empowerment” (D13-29). As a site of accountability, trainings prompt participants to learn and then make use of particular tools and skills, further atomizing diversity work to the level of individual capacities. One diversity training targeted specifically towards organizational leaders focused on the development of six traits that would foster inclusiveness: commitment, courage, cognizance of bias, curiosity, cultural intelligence,

and collaboration. In discussing the trait of courage, “the facilitator highlights the words bravery and humility, and says that courageous leaders hold themselves and others accountable. She then asks participants: ‘why does D&I matter to you?’” (F7-6&7). The reference to accountability here, associated with bravery and humility, begs the question: accountable to whom, or what? The appeal for a “personal why” in relation to diversity work suggests that organizational members must stay accountable to diversity work itself, as an individualized activity divorced from organizational practice. The separation of diversity work from other organizational activities prevents questions of accountability that take into account organizing practices and nonhuman actors as enmeshed with individuals (e.g., “How do interactions and practices that I am a part of shape how, when, and to what degree diversity work matters here?”).

In the context of this inclusive leadership training, an individualized accountability carried through to a wrap-up activity involving creating a personal action plan. The accompanying activity worksheet, entitled “Inclusive Leadership Action Plan,” asks attendees which of the six leadership traits they would like to further develop, alongside the following questions: “1) How will you cultivate your selected trait(s)? 2) What resources (e.g., data, funding, professional development) will you need? 3) How will you track and evaluate your progress? What is your timeline?” (D22). Here, engagement in diversity work amounts to the application of personal skills and traits, and the handout asks attendees to reflect on how they will personally plan, implement, track, and evaluate their individual progress integrating such skills into their work. The worksheet questions imply that accountability to diversity work begins and ends with the individual on their path of the personal journey, reinforcing the bifurcation of work that silos diversity work in organizing.

Nonhuman actors are certainly referenced in trainings, though viewing them through the lens of the metaphorical journey as a sensemaking device positions them as secondary and inert, reinforcing the ontological bifurcation. While the worksheet questions above evoke data, funding, and additional trainings, the ontological primacy of the human subject converts these nonhuman actors into stable, apolitical tools and accessories that aid personal development. As Ashcraft (2019) notes, “dualisms endemic to Western thinking, such as human-nonhuman and subject-object, are preserved. People act, whereas stuff does not; things are inert material, opportunity and constraint to be manipulated by humans” (p. 108). In this manner, diversity trainings and a varied array of nonhuman actors assist in prompting authentic and accountable behavior among human participants, while at the same time obscuring their influence by reinforcing the centrality of the human actor. Following the rationale of a personal journey, where authentic belief is paramount, the onus of diversity work is not on the dynamic relations of organizing in practice, but rather sits squarely with the individual. Trainings and the metaphorical journey therefore reveal how an ontological separation of human and nonhuman actors arises and persists, in turn contributing to a bifurcation of diversity work from other organizational work.

### ***Expertise as Embodied Diversity and Differential Labor***

The coupled bifurcations of human/nonhuman and diversity work/organizational work help to construct notions of expertise that differentially distribute labor among organizational members, inside and outside of training contexts. Expertise within the metaphorical journey adheres to organizational members who embody identities coded as diverse, contributing to tokenization and additional labor required of people with marginalized identities.

Diversity work often calls upon individuals who recognizably embody diversity. In an interview with an equity program manager at a large government institution, Paco notes how training settings become spaces that spotlight people with marginalized identities, and particularly people of color:

Sometimes I think in diversity work that we can harm people of color by looking at them and tokenizing them...because it's like, you know, you'll be doing your training, you'll be talking about somebody, or you're talking about a group. And there's the one person in the room who fits into that group. And everybody's looking at them to see their reaction or coming to them and asking them for kind of help and guidance. And it's like we have to stop relying on those who are negatively impacted to help do the teaching...So I think the marginalized groups who often are most impacted are the ones who can also be harmed. (I7-9&10)

Paco reveals that training spaces, particularly those in predominantly white organizations, further spotlight the embodied expertise of individuals understood to be diverse. To be sure, people with marginalized identities have a more complete view of the world as a result of needing to understand both their own experiences in addition to the experiences of dominant groups, as standpoint theory importantly reveals (Harris, 2017). However, the notion of diversity work as a personal journey elevates such embodied expertise as providing a means of “knowing” the Other’s journey for the benefit of one’s own, rather than prompting reflection on how all people are implicated in creating inequitable social orders together with nonhuman actors via practice. As Paco notes, the foregrounding of the personal journeys of marginalized people results in additional labor for such individuals, upon whom privileged participants rely for “help and guidance,” and to “help do the training” itself.

This added labor takes place both within and outside the bounds of a training space. During field notes of a diversity and inclusion committee that was debriefing an all-staff racial equity training that had happened the week prior, one African American staff member discusses his reticence to lead a training debrief conversation because of his identity:

He said that, as an African American, “I walked in today feeling different than when I walked in Friday [for the training].” He says that he doesn’t want to lead a discussion group debriefing the training because he doesn’t want people to come to the group just to see what he feels about it because he’s African American. (F1-9)

This staff member’s reflections reveal how embodied expertise becomes a prized commodity in diversity work that spotlights marginalized individuals in settings like diversity trainings. Rather than attending a debrief session to reflect on the racial equity training’s implications for themselves and their work, privileged staff members can remain relatively disengaged voyeurs. Bruce, a director of diversity, equity, and inclusion at a large education institution, reflects on how his African American identity shapes his experience engaging in diversity work in the organization:

I do suffer from imposter syndrome. I do suffer from stereotype threat because I’m the Black man in DEI. So the first thing I had to do was the token thought, that people might think I’m a token. So that’s the first thing I overcome with that...It’s not that people called me that or treated me that way. I wanted to make it clear that I was not because I knew that perception would be there. (I1-11)

Bruce mentions the notion of stereotype threat, a concept that addresses the additional stress and cognitive effort required of people who are concerned about confirming a widely held stereotype about one or more of their social identities (Steele, 2010). Not only are people with marginalized identities called upon disproportionately to engage in diversity work, such tokenization prompts additional attention and scrutiny from the organization and organizational members, in training settings and beyond.

An individualization of diversity work helps facilitate notions of embodied expertise that not only harm marginalized community members, as Bruce indicates, but also distract from an interrogation of how privileged identities are implicated in diversity work. Disproportionate attention towards organizational members with marginalized identities in trainings diverts attention away from how all participants, alongside nonhuman actors, contribute to particular

inequitable social relations in organizing. This dynamic of both foregrounding bodies marked as diverse and obscuring privileged identities helps perpetuate the kinds of inequities that diversity work seeks to address. While embodied expertise requires additional labor for people with minoritized identities, those with privileged identities in the organization remain *outside* of expertise, and therefore more easily exempt from the attendant responsibilities and labor associated with expertise in diversity work.

In this manner, the metaphorical journey of diversity work and the associated practices of diversity trainings not only help to separate the individual and diversity work from organizing, but also reinforce whiteness, among other normative identities. Embodied expertise can effectively extract people with marginalized identities from the journey of diversity work, suddenly converted from wayfarer to guide. To be “on the journey” of diversity work is itself a kind of privilege, one that requires less in the way of knowledge, responsibility, and action. The journey as it arises in diversity work therefore helps enact a differential accountability, doling out responsibilities across organizational bodies via marginalized and privileged identities.

This differential accountability extends well beyond the context of diversity trainings. In my interview with CSC, a Latinx volunteer committee member for an organizational diversity, inclusion, and equity committee, she notes how members of the organization approach her to do additional work as someone who is perceived to have more expertise:

...there is this [diversity, inclusion, and equity committee] who is supposed to be advising and just doing the coaching. And then others doing the work. Like, I don't have to put together a communication. I can read a communication that you write and tell you you're forgetting about this or about that, “as a brown woman, I think this and that.” But there is this need for spoon feeding like “oh [CSC] must know, oh let's ask [CSC].” (I4-23)

Embodied expertise allows dominant groups to disengage from diversity work, while creating more work for marginalized individuals, as is the case for CSC. This differential



accountability and labor helps to ensure that expertise remains embodied in diversity work, with the metaphorical journey undertaken by those with privilege orienting towards a horizon of expertise that is continuously, and advantageously, deferred.

***The Expertise Silo: A Journey's Dead End***

Ultimately, the adherence of diversity work expertise to marginalized identities, when coupled with a bifurcation of diversity work from organizational work, results in a separation and siloing of diversity work expertise from other forms of organizational expertise. Such a bifurcation of expertise further marginalizes organizational members coded as diverse in organizing. For CSC, who serves as a volunteer chair of her institution's diversity and inclusion committee, this includes struggling to balance work duties, diversity work, and time with her family:

It is another full-time job. And it's not sustainable. There can be a lot of passion and practice and it's not sustainable and it's not right. I mean, that's when a little bit of the hard piece comes and plays because I as a human being I'm volunteering a lot of my personal time with my family, with my son. (I4-21)

Diversity work enacted as a personal journey, and a compartmentalization that arises from it, helps foster a scarcity of time and energy that falls differentially on marginalized individuals. Despite this added labor and responsibility, a compartmentalization of diversity work contributes to a delegitimation of diversity work expertise in other organizational activities. Abby, who helps spearhead her business's inclusion and diversity initiative, indicates that she was asked to lead a diversity training in her organization because of her sexual identity as a lesbian. Abby notes that decisions about new hires on the part of leadership generally come down to a decision between diversity or work-related skills:

I'll just say our leadership team is constantly tripping over words when they talk about like bringing in diverse people. It's always, well, they need to have great skills and they can be diverse. It's like, it's kind of like one or the other. (I2-11)

Embodied expertise in the form of identities marked as diverse, prized in training sessions and within the personal journey of diversity work, loses its currency outside of such contexts. As a siloed, personal endeavor, diversity work becomes both time intensive and undervalued as a skill set in other organizational activities. Kate, an organizational consultant on issues of diversity and inclusion, notes how dynamics of time and delegitimation punish marginalized people engaged in diversity work:

Unfortunately, what tends to happen more these days is that role can actually have a negative effect on promotion, because it takes time and because time taken away from your normal job and what you were originally hired for is oftentimes sort of lost...I think for better or for worse people who focus on DEI tend to be people from underrepresented groups...I think that that is a positive, but can also be a real negative. Unfortunately...they sort of get a negative ding, specifically sort of women and people of color if they raise their hand to volunteer for this. They actually get negatively dinged on their career advancement, which is too bad. And part of that is because of that lack of taking account for the work. (15-5&10)

The metaphorical personal journey and training practices arise as normative practices and means of sensemaking in diversity work that spotlight embodied expertise, in ways that entail differential accountability and labor for people with marginalized identities. At the same time, the bifurcation of diversity work from organizational work fosters temporal scarcity and a delegitimation of diversity work. For people with marginalized identities, the journey of diversity work therefore leads to a dead end. As the personal journey and trainings call upon the labor of particular bodies, they simultaneously foreclose opportunities for diversity work and related expertise to be recognized and valued organizationally. Such an inequitable dynamic relies upon the layers of division that spring from a bifurcation of human and nonhuman actors. Holding the human actors apart as separate, as the metaphorical journey and training practices help to accomplish, maintains a normatively individualized construction of diversity work that contributes to inequitable relationships, even as such work purports to address them.

### **Organization as Container: Data Collection and a Politics of Measurement**

An interrogation of the metaphorical journey and training practices, which highlight diversity work as an individual and personalized endeavor, begs the question: where is the *organization* in organizational diversity work? The container metaphor in diversity work aids in tracing the other side of the human/nonhuman bifurcation instantiated in diversity work practices and sensemaking. If diversity work primarily serves to usher organizational members along a personal journey, the organization figures as a container that provides the ideal conditions for such a journey. The container metaphor helps to bring the organization into relief as an entity relegated to the background of diversity work. Positioning the organization as responsible for the conditions or surroundings in which human activity occurs fosters a view of diversity work, and attendant notions of diversity and inclusion, that are fixated on counting and accounting for individual and group behavior. Diversity work as a form of a designed container therefore marshals an approach to diversity and inclusion that is both instrumentalist and bounded, bifurcating the organization from individual activity.

While the particular metaphors vary, evocations of the organization as a container abound in diversity work, appearing under various guises that include climate, ecosystem, environment, culture, and system. As an example, one multinational company's presentation materials frame its efforts around diversity and inclusion as fostering a particular kind of environment:

Objective: To provide an inclusive environment that attracts and retains a values- and purpose-driven workforce; cultivates the intellectual capital of unique skills, backgrounds, and experiences for innovative solutions; and enables all of our people to thrive in their careers. (D17-2)

Whether referencing an environment, culture, or climate, these kinds of statements craft the organization as a container in need of intentional design for the sake of conducting diversity work. The organization is charged with cultivating, enabling, and providing such optimal

conditions, under the implicit understanding that a container spatially demarks the organization as a bounded entity. Yet, as evident in the quote above, the organizational container plays a supporting role to the main event: human actors. Whether attracting and retaining a diverse workforce, making people feel valued and welcomed, or promoting the “intellectual capital” of workers, the container metaphor tasks the organization with providing the right kinds of conditions for organizational members to engage in diversity work.

The container metaphor is a popular and persistent means of conceptualizing organizing that can be found both in organizational activity and organization scholarship. In the field of organizational communication, Ashcraft and others (2009) note that a container metaphor situates the organization as a “bracketed space in which communication occurs” (p. 9). Scholars operating from the container metaphor study organizational activity within the presumed stable confines of the organization, failing to interrogate how, and to what effects, the organization becomes entified: “From this container root metaphor, the ontological status of organization (i.e., what is it?) is rarely questioned” (Ashcraft et al., 2009, p. 9).

Rather than assume that diversity work occurs within an organization that serves as an unproblematic and static backdrop, I shift kaleidoscopic inquiry to how the notion of the organization-as-container arises in diversity work, and what consequences emerge from such a formulation. To do so, I turn to quantitative data collection as a normative practice in diversity work, which often evokes the organization as a container and provides further evidence of the human actor’s separation from nonhuman actors in organizing. Foregrounding the organization lends new insights into the consequences of such a bifurcation beyond the human journey. As the methods section to this research project above indicates, data collection is a practice that always carries with it political implications. Just as I endeavored to interrogate my own practices of data

collection, I examine data collection practices in diversity work to better understand how the identifying and collecting of data can contribute to inequitable social orders in organizing.

***Making a Difference with Data Collection: A Politics of Measurement***

Practices of data collection in diversity work tend to operate from a view of the organization as a container or setting charged with providing the optimal conditions for the personal journey of diversity work. Positioning the organization as a contained environment within which human actors operate in turn shapes diversity work along a politics of measurement and alignment, where data collection practices instantiate differences among organizational members that the organization is then responsible for assessing and regulating. Such efforts make particular kinds of differences relevant, and activities that flow from data collection, such as recruitment and retention, can serve to further silo organizational diversity work.

Across the data, engagement in organizational diversity work often includes data collection as a well advised, if not requisite, activity. The substance of data collection therefore not only says a great deal about diversity work, but more importantly shapes what diversity work can be in consequential ways. Central to the practice of data collection in diversity work is workforce demographic information, as the following excerpt from a human resource guide on “How to Develop a Diversity and Inclusion Initiative” makes evident:

By capturing data on employee demographics, an employer is better able to understand the diversity of its employees and identify any areas of concern or trends. Historically, these data have included federal and state protected categories; however, recent trends indicate that other factors, such as personality type and thinking/learning style, may also be of value, though perhaps harder to find national data for. (D16-1)

The report also recommends collecting data on “the current company culture,” suggesting that “surveying employees can help shed light on their perception of the company in relation to encouraging and appreciating diversity in the workplace” (D16-2). Here, data collection implies

quantitatively focusing on organizational members' social identities, perceptions, personality types, and learning styles, seeking to provide data points to individuals' cognition and behavior. Data collection as a practice therefore aligns with the personal journey metaphor. Positioning the individual and social identity groups as the locus of inquiry helps to ensure that the "areas of concern" identified by data collection remain centered around interrogating and understanding the individual in diversity work, rather than extending out to other nonhuman actors that similarly shape the social orders of work and organizing.

Data collection's isolation of employees situates the organization as responsible for counting and accounting for its members, in addition to fostering a "company culture" that is conducive to diversity in the workplace. Carla, a manager for her nonprofit's diversity and inclusion efforts, notes her own struggles responding to a prioritization of quantitative data in diversity work:

...a lot of people, you know, because of that white supremacy culture binary thinking, it's like, "oh, if it's not quantitative, it's not relevant," right, and so I'm like, "no, there's all kinds of data." (I3-9&10)

Carla notes how particular kinds of data are deemed relevant and worthy in diversity work. Such quantitative data collection practices depend upon a container view of the organization, reinforcing the organization as a spatially delimited entity and operating from the premise that a defined organizational environment exists, and that it can be accurately measured and designed. Just as training practices help further notions of the metaphorical journey and an ontological bifurcation, data collection practices operating from a container metaphor further a separation of human actors from nonhuman actors in diversity work.

Data collection also helps to define diversity and inclusion as operative terms within the container metaphor. From a container viewpoint of the organization, *diversity* implicitly signifies

the numerical representation of people coded as diverse, and *inclusion* their retention and satisfaction within the boundaries of the workplace. Diversity defined as such scrutinizes people demographically identified as diverse, despite efforts to position diversity work as pertaining to all organizational members. One national corporation's inclusion and diversity presentation materials note that "A White person is not 'non-diverse'" (D17-5), yet earlier in the presentation an infographic states that the organization's board of directors is "41% diverse," presumably indicating people of color and other marginalized identities (D17-2). Similar to diversity trainings, such practices of accounting in diversity work disproportionately draw attention to marginalized identities, allowing whiteness and other normative identities to fall away from view as a primary concern in addressing organizational inequities. Operating from and reinforcing a human/nonhuman bifurcation, data collection practices continue to create divisions among organizational members that denote which individuals are scrutinized. In this manner, data collection as a normative practice, both in terms of *what* data is deemed relevant and collected, and *how* the data is used to discuss and engage in diversity work, can contribute to inequitable social orders in organizing.

In addition to relegating whiteness to the background, diversity work that centers around counting populations within the organization as a container can inevitably exclude particular identities. During a research interview, Ryan, an executive manager of a diversity, equity, and inclusion programs office in a large multinational technology corporation, mentions issues with not being able to count certain identity categories with an employee self-identification (ID) program due to legal restrictions in other countries:

I know that there's definitely some shortcomings that we still have to fix. Like a whole proper global self-ID program. It's not there yet. It's only here in the U.S. and I feel like that's the basis of getting things done is it's a census, to be honest. Like if you can't be counted, how are you going to be represented? And if it's illegal to be counted, then it's

like, I don't know. I feel like it's the end of the road for that group until either laws change or they do it behind their back and hope to God nobody sues them for it. (I9-4)

For those identities that are not counted in data collection - because they legally cannot be counted, because employees choose not to volunteer such information, or because certain identities do not register as necessary to be counted in diversity work - Ryan implies that there is little diversity work can do for such groups. If data on demographics provide "the basis of getting things done" in diversity work, not being counted in the organizational container signifies the "end of the road." Data collection therefore enacts a politics of measurement that relies on the notion of the organization as a contained environment, where opportunities and resources are afforded to those who can be counted and represented as diverse. Such a politics relies on discrete identity categories amenable to being counted, a willingness among organization members to volunteer potentially closeted parts about their identities (Harris & McDonald, 2018), and a means of determining who does and does not count as diverse. While data collection presumes to merely reflect the reality of the organization, data practices are, in fact, *making a difference*, foregrounding human actors as apart from nonhuman actors, and bringing certain social differences to the fore as salient and potentially erasing or minimizing others.

One notable omission often missing from quantitative data practices in diversity work is indigeneity. As but one example, an organizational diversity and inclusion framework provided by a consulting firm highlights what it argues are "the most important elements, practices, focus areas, stakeholders, audiences, and communications media to consider" when undertaking a diversity initiative (D9-2). Under "Constituencies," the framework includes the following social identity categories that ought to be taken into account when engaging in diversity work: "culture, ethnicity/race, gender, generation/age, invisible dimensions, language, mental/physical status, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, veterans" (D9-3). Indigenous identity is absent from this



list, likely presumed to be a part of culture, “ethnicity/race,” or nationality. Yet as Kauanui (2016) asserts, indigenous identity cannot be conflated with other identity categories such as ethnicity, race, or nationality, as is often the case with data collection practices in diversity work. Such categories do not account for structured efforts of elimination of indigenous peoples in settler colonial societies like the United States (Wolfe, 2006), nor do they acknowledge indigenous people’s ongoing claims to land and sovereignty. Here, the container metaphor becomes particularly consequential in relation to data collection practices, where the demarcated bounds of the organization seem to preclude concerns of settler colonialism and indigenous rights in diversity work. Efforts of improving workplace diversity and inclusion operate from a bounded notion of organizing, making inside/outside distinctions that obscure the role of organizations in furthering settler colonialism through their presence in settler colonial societies and erasure of indigeneity. Collapsing indigenous identity with race or nationality, as many data collection practices do, therefore contributes to a myopic view of diversity work that is limited to the concerns within the presumed container of the organization. In so doing, diversity work’s politics of measurement can serve to not only erase certain identities, but also further inequitable social orders such as settler colonialism.

### ***Data-Driven Activities and a Compartmentalization of Diversity Work***

The centrality of data collection in diversity work helps to ensure that issues of organizational privilege and erasure persist in organizing through a politics of measurement. The aforementioned human resource guide defines data collection as the first of four “phases” of a diversity and inclusion initiative: “1. Data collection and analysis to determine the need for change” (D16-1). Practices of data collection become the starting point from which subsequent diversity work actions should be taken, serving the important role of identifying and justifying

the need for diversity work to occur in the first place. As one organization's leader mentioned during field observations of a diversity training: "we can't address or reward what we don't measure" (F6-7). The impetus for diversity work hinges upon data, setting up a relationship in which diversity work must constantly reference data to not only prompt organizational change, but also quantify progress towards addressing needs originally identified by the data collection process itself. Even as the data collection practices present diversity work with inconsistencies and challenges to achieving organizational equity, data collection's recursiveness continues to breathe life into a politics of measurement. The foregrounding of marginalized identities, minimization of privileged identities in engaging in diversity work, and erasure of inequities related to issues that include indigeneity and coloniality therefore persist, and become an integral part of other practices associated with diversity work.

Various diversity work activities can be traced back to data collection practices which operate from a container metaphor of the organization. Data collection practices therefore help to shape what diversity work can be in terms of organizational activities, furthering a division between diversity work and other organizing practices. While evocations of the organizational environment, climate, and ecosystem that arise from data collection might connote a view of diversity work that is all-encompassing in terms of organizing, data collection practices help create an environment apart, a separate world existing parallel to work, rather than integrated into it. In my interview with Ryan, mentioned above, he similarly detailed how data collection should serve as a starting point for engaging in diversity work in ways that inform organizational activity: "For me, [the] doing of diversity work I think always starts typically with the data of being counted" (I9-4). In Ryan's organization, data collection practices of gathering demographic data lead to additional activities that are tracked via a monthly "scorecard" that

tabulates diversity metrics of hiring, retention, and promotion. When asked what constitutes diversity work in his organization, Ryan responds:

Diversity and inclusion work is going to be...kind of the scorecards that we do for our executives. So dealing with hiring, retention and development of minorities, that's one facet. The other facet would be the employee resource groups as the other one kind of backbone, pushing that from the bottom up. (I9-13)

Ryan's comments reinforce a notion of data collection that fixates on human actors, particularly those understood as diverse. Data collection practices motivate other organizational activities that come to be understood as diversity work: employee recruitment, hiring, development, and retention. The container metaphor lurks among this construction of diversity work, fashioned as a means of identifying and bringing in individuals understood to be diverse into the bounds of the organization, and then finding ways to keep them in the organizational container once they have arrived. Ryan mentions employee resource groups (ERGs) as a part of these activities, which provide gatherings and programming related to social identity such as racial minorities, women, veterans, and LGBTQ-identified people. While "allies" are encouraged to join these groups, notably absent are ERGs specifically for members with privileged identities to engage from their social positions in diversity work. As places of affinity, ERGs certainly provide spaces for connection and support among marginalized individuals that might not otherwise exist in the organization. However, ERG's connection to data collection and related employee retention practices limits the ability of diversity work to engage all organizational members, particularly those with privileged identities, as responsible for and accountable to addressing organizational inequities. Similar to the metaphorical journey, a politics of measurement that operates from a container metaphor of organization foregrounds marginalized identities while minimizing the role of privileged identities in addressing inequitable social orders in organizing.

Constructing diversity work from the starting point of data collection practices and demographic representation can simultaneously serve to separate and silo diversity work among other organizational activities. During field observations of a committee charged with overseeing a nascent diversity and inclusion initiative in a company, one member noted that the organization's recently drafted diversity statement had been completed and was now live on the website: "One person asks how they can find the statement on the website, and [the committee member] responds that you need to click on the 'Careers' subtab, which is nested within the 'Our Story' tab, and the statement is located under the heading 'Join the Team'" (F2-2). For this nonprofit, as for many other organizations, a diversity and inclusion statement seeks to make public an organization's commitment to engaging in diversity work. The statement itself reads on the website:

In order to grow our impact, we're becoming an inclusive organization where the diversity of our program is reflected in our staff, and where each individual's unique background is valued for the perspective it adds to our collective vision. We're leading the way in bridging traditional gaps between systems in our country, and we can't do that unless our team is able to collaborate meaningfully across perceived differences that other institutions too often see as barriers.

The text of the diversity and inclusion statement reflects its placement under the "Careers" tab on the organization's website, honing in on demographic diversity, and an inclusive environment that supports people's unique backgrounds. Both the statement and its placement on the website signal that the organization's diversity work efforts are primarily relevant to recruitment and hiring activities, and less so for other aspects of the organization highlighted elsewhere on the website. Positioned where it is on the company website, it is difficult to envision someone finding this statement unless they are specifically looking for employment at the company, as even the company's current employees had difficulty locating the statement. Diversity work mediates a prospective employee's entrance into and experience

within the organization as a container, though does not necessarily permeate all aspects of organizing and work. In this manner, data collection practices and the container metaphor further contribute to a bifurcation of work: diversity work's division and isolation from other organizational activities, which ultimately limits diversity work's capacity for more comprehensively addressing inequities in organizing.

***The Journey and the Container: Aligning for Diversity Work***

Though I have interrogated each separately, the metaphors of journey and container, and their associated practices, deeply relate to and augment one another. Drawing from data that identifies when a diversity or inclusion “problem” exits, diversity work calls organizations themselves to be responsible for providing the resources, space, and time necessary for trainings to occur. In the context of trainings that portray diversity work as personal and internal, the organization then falls to the background, relegated once again to the stable container in which the main concern is the human journey.

While the metaphor of the personal journey casts diversity work as an insular effort, the container metaphor provides a way to conceptualize the personal journey as an organizational endeavor, particularly through the notion of alignment. Marilyn, senior program manager for inclusion recruiting at a large corporation, provides a viewpoint of organizational diversity work that centers around alignment as she outlines what the ideal organizational state would be for diversity work:

...ideal state is, you know, DEI work is inclusive. And, you know, you've got it like bottom up. Right. You've got employees understanding what it means that their company being- If somebody asks you, “hey, what's diversity mean at your company?” Everybody has the same definition, right, and can speak to it and understand how it plays into the culture, how it's part of them, is excited about it. (I6-13)

Marilyn's evocations of alignment arise from a depiction of all organizational members sharing similar understandings of diversity language, as well as how diversity work is integrated into both an individual's work and the organization's culture. Here, the metaphors of personal journey and organizational container act in concert to constitute diversity work, where the container provides the right conditions for aligning employees' personal journeys in order to bring about organizational change. Such portrayals of alignment show up elsewhere in the data, particularly in relation to the container metaphor. One organization's announcement of an inaugural equity and inclusion position at a large nonprofit notes that one of the primary responsibilities of the role will include "Fostering a unified culture throughout [the organization] where all team members feel welcomed and valued" (D-14-6). A unified culture indicates organizational alignment as a critical aim of diversity work. In field observations of a session that provided an overview of an institution's racial equity efforts, one of the presenters noted that trainings were an important means of achieving organizational change:

Together, this will mean that 30% of people will have completed the training and will therefore be on the same page and use the same language and share a sense of urgency around equity - [the presenter] says that is what is needed for a tipping point in creating change in the organization. (F5-3)

The presenter's comments bring the implications of diversity work alignment into further relief. Here, organizational change is a matter of aggregation: the alignment of human actors' language and feeling (i.e., their personal journeys) in accordance with diversity work priorities. Training provides the means of accomplishing this effort, which depends upon a view of diversity work as a journey that spotlights human actors and personal effort. Alignment as a mode of engaging in diversity work converts the personal journey and diversity trainings into data points that operate from a container view of the organization.

The drawback of this portrayal of organizational change is that it continues to rest upon notions of the journey and container metaphors that isolate human efforts and minimize nonhuman actors in diversity work. The container metaphor casts the organization as responsible for producing the conditions for the alignment of employees' personal journeys through practices like data collection and trainings, yet the human journey still takes precedence, casting nonhuman actors and the "organization" as stable, inert, and ancillary. With the human actor on center stage, efforts to organizationally align members' personal journeys ultimately rest upon the compliance and willingness of organizational members, as Kate, a diversity and inclusion consultant, points out:

...there are going to be some people whose mindsets you are not going to change and you have to put structures in place to deal with those other than trying to force them down the process...you're just not going to change everybody's mind and you have to sort of be okay with that. (15-14&15)

Rather than attend to dynamics between human and nonhuman actors that contribute to organizational inequities, diversity work remains focused on the personal journey and changing people's hearts and minds, or "dealing" with those individuals who are noncompliant. With the aid of alignment, the container metaphor therefore enables the personal journey and a bifurcation of humans and nonhumans to keep their place of prominence in diversity work. The result is a seemingly irreconcilable separation of human actors and organizing, helping to ensure that related organizational inequities that spotlight and silo marginalized individuals remain. An interrogation of the container metaphor reveals constructions of the organization to be far from inert, but rather a dynamic process that occurs through practice, and contributes to instituting a variety of bifurcations in diversity work, including human/nonhuman, diverse/nondiverse, inside/outside, and diversity work/organizational work. Viewing the journey and container together provides a more nuanced view of not only how organizational members make sense of

diversity work and what normative practices constitute it, but also how such arrangements contribute to persistent organizational inequities.

### **Leadership at the Table: Dependency and Agency in Diversity Work**

The journey and container metaphors frame diversity work as a human, personal, and siloed endeavor, one that differentially surveils and calls upon marginalized identities in part through a politics of measurement. Such dynamics largely rest upon a bifurcation of human actors from the organization, which presents a fundamental impasse in conceptualizing how organizational change happens, or is even possible in the first place. Arising from this conundrum, the metaphorical table appears in diversity work as an ill-defined yet often-referenced plane of existence where the personal and organizational become synonymous: where personal action translates to material organizational effect. Positional leadership as a practice is often implicitly invoked alongside references to the table metaphor, in the form of access to power, resources, and decision-making capable of initiating meaningful and lasting organizational change. In practices and accounts of diversity work, positional leadership is often edified as a necessity, and the actions of individual leaders are often conflated with organizational action itself. Here, leadership metonymically operates as organization, effectively serving as an attempted resolution to the human/nonhuman ontological bifurcation. While positional leadership attempts to bridge this divide, it simultaneously reinforces the gap's existence, ensuring leadership remains a primary reference point for diversity work. Tracing the metaphorical table and positional leadership practices therefore uncovers relations of scarcity, access, and dependency in diversity work that ultimately limit a capacity to act and contribute to organizational inequities.

### ***Setting the Table: Addressing the Ontological Bifurcation***



Persistent questions arise out of the human/nonhuman bifurcation that diversity work instantiates. If diversity work is conceptualized as a personal journey, where the organization serves as a container that provides the optimal conditions for personalized and internal work, what is organizational change in diversity work, and how does it occur? How does a sometimes microscopic emphasis on individual skill, action, and thought translate to achieving organizational aims of diversity, inclusion, and equity? While such dilemmas were rarely explicitly discussed in the data, the confusions produced by a separation of human actors from the organization were still evident in enactments and accounts of diversity work. During a diversity and inclusion committee debrief of an all-staff diversity training, one committee member attempted to clarify and reconcile individual and organizational change in diversity work:

[One staff member] says that he would like to learn more about how if [the organization] improved 20 percent of its collective DEI score, what difference would that make for staff as individuals: “sometimes I’m not exactly sure if the purpose is to make me a better person or to make the organization better.” (F1-3)

The ontological bifurcation produced in diversity work provides a means of understanding this staff member’s confusion as perhaps an inevitable result of such a division, which effectively separates organizational members from organizing and conceptualizations of the organization itself. This separation of human actors and organization stymies what kinds of changes can be envisioned and enacted through diversity work. The metaphorical table emerges in diversity work as one means of addressing the divide. Participants in both interviews and during field observations frequently invoked the metaphor of the table, typically using the table as a conceptual sensemaking tool for describing diversity work and its aspirational aims. Multiple people referenced a metaphorical table when defining terms like diversity equity, and

inclusion. One trainer during field observations defined diversity as “representation, who’s at the table” (F8-3), and in my interview with Abby, she similarly defined diversity as:

...making sure that there are an array of people from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives at the table and then making sure that people feel included. And that means they can celebrate who they are at that table. And then really the equitable piece is that everyone has like high outcomes for what they bring to the table. (I2-2)

For Abby, diversity, inclusion, and equity are each positioned in relation to the metaphorical table. The table provides a means of simultaneously defining and envisioning the not-yet of diversity work, ideals towards which diversity work orients. Later on in my interview with Abby, she again brings up the metaphorical table, this time in terms of actions required of DEI work:

I do think that stepping back and stepping forward is what DEI work is in many ways, because if we’re saying we want everyone at the table, then some of us who have been taking up a lot of space at the table need to step back to open up room. (I2-8)

This description provides additional texture to the table, here as a metaphorical space inhabited by organizational members and implying access to power. After this comment, I press Abby on her account of the table, and what it specifically represents:

**Sean:** When you talk about the table, you talked about, you know, the table with diversity, equity, inclusion. You talked about like stepping back and stepping forward, you know, at the table. What is the table? Is the table the DEI conversations? Is the table the ability to make change or decisions writ large or broadly in the organization?

**Abby:** Great question. I think it’s, it’s a table of belonging. And. And so therefore, it’s like, it’s the table where everyone has a voice. I think it’s a, it’s a desired state. It’s not a space that I think we currently have. But I think it’s a, yeah, it’s a hope. It’s a hope...It’s not there yet. We’re not there...I think it’s a place of having a voice in DEI work and making change and, yeah, it’s very elusive...That’s a great question. I am struggling myself to define it. (I2-9)

When pointedly asked to define the table, Abby has difficulty finding the words. This future-oriented description includes having a voice and making a change, encapsulating a more expansive capacity to act that implicates organizational change. If the table represents a horizon

where the difference between organization and human actor become hard to distinguish, then it is little wonder that organizational members might struggle to define such a ubiquitous metaphor: the table represents a mode of being that is strange to diversity work as it is practiced, grounded in the human/nonhuman bifurcation.

Even with this additional explanation from Abby, questions linger. Where might this table be? Who is already at the table, able to determine access for others? Interrogating the table further reveals that positional leadership often adheres to the metaphor of the table. Similar to data collection and trainings, positional leadership is a practice that shapes and is shaped by diversity work in relation to an ontological bifurcation. Leadership is often implicitly associated with the metaphorical table, and at times slips the bonds of categorization within the human/nonhuman bifurcation, inhabiting both simultaneously. I therefore explore the table and positional leadership together, to reveal what possibilities, and foreclosures, they introduce into diversity work's divisions.

### ***Leadership as Individual and Organization: Bridging the Bifurcation***

Diversity work often elicits and edifies leadership, though it does so in ways that blur distinctions between human actors and organization. One corporation's diversity and inclusion presentation materials frame leaders as critical to an "Inclusion & Diversity Strategy." Under the heading "Leadership Engagement & Accountability," the materials state: "Our leaders own inclusion and diversity and demonstrate their clear commitment through their words and actions each day. They hold each other accountable at every level for advancing diversity and strengthening an inclusive environment" (D17-4). Discussions of leadership such as this portray a personal journey entailing individual commitment through word and deed, yet also evoke the organization as a container, wherein leaders attend to "strengthening an inclusive environment."

Positional leaders begin to take on qualities in diversity work that extend beyond the individualized and personal journey. Take, for example, one consulting agency's "maturity model" for organizational diversity and inclusion work, which includes four levels of organizational advancement. The authors note that the engagement of positional leaders prompt meaningful organizational change:

More substantial cultural change begins at level 3 - a true transition point - when the CEO and other influential business leaders step up, challenge the status quo, and address barriers to inclusion. By role-modeling inclusive behaviors and aligning and adapting organizational systems (for example, by tying rewards and recognition to inclusive behavior), they create the conditions that influence employee behavior and mind-sets. (D18-13)

Once again, both the individual and organization are present in this discussion of diversity work and leadership, with the focus progressing from leaders' individual behaviors to changing organizational systems. By "aligning and adapting organizational systems," leaders help to shift "employee behavior and mind-sets" in a way that is evocative of the container metaphor discussed in the previous analysis section, yet here, the leader assumes the organizational task of creating the conditions for diversity work. Another company's organizational announcement for a new diversity and inclusion leadership hire makes a similar case about leadership's role: "Leaders are ultimately curators and stewards of an organization's climate and culture" (D25).

Similar to evocations of the metaphorical table, discussions of leadership as such speak simultaneously to both diversity work as an organizational container and as an individual journey, appearing to traverse the bifurcation between human actors and the organization. A change in the behaviors of positional leaders becomes a linchpin, "a true transition point" in instituting organizational change in diversity work (D18-13). This extends to the hiring of

leadership positions with specific diversity, inclusion, and equity roles, as is evident in one organization's announcement of a new leadership hire:

While many companies have stated an intended desire to make their workplaces more diverse, the [organization] took a major step toward turning intention into action today when it announced the appointment of...its first-ever Executive Director of Equity and Organization Culture. (D14-2)

The appointment of a leadership position becomes a means of making organizational desire manifest, and of initiating tangible organizational change. Leadership is therefore discussed in a way that suggests that leadership action is synonymous with organizational change in diversity work, in ways that the actions of other organizational members are not. In this manner, leadership becomes a stand-in, effectively functioning as a metonym, for the organization. Leadership as a metonym for organization provides a means of bridging the gap between individuals and organization that diversity work itself helps to instantiate: a way of talking about the organization as an actor with agency in order to conceptualize organizational change in diversity work beyond the individual journey.

Diversity work's continued and persistent bifurcations of ontology, work, and expertise through activities like trainings and data collection help to ensure that leadership remains relevant and necessary for diversity work. Evidence of leadership's centrality to diversity work abound, and leaders serve as frequent reference points throughout practices and accounts of diversity work. A human resource guide to developing a diversity and inclusion initiative asserts that the success of diversity work hinges upon leadership:

For the diversity initiative to succeed, senior level buy-in and support are vital. Senior management must understand the business case for diversity and inclusion initiatives, with direct links to the company's strategic goals. It is helpful to identify a senior-level champion who can be tasked with visible support of the initiative and ultimately responsible for keeping the program "alive." (D16-3)

Here, diversity work depends upon leadership, needs a leader to serve as a champion, a voice, an advocate, and an evangelist for the changes that diversity work seeks to bring about. Diversity work also centers on leadership as a key organizational constituent, with activities specifically designed to target positional leaders. One higher education institution's inclusion, diversity, and equity plan situates leadership as one of three overarching goals: "Create a permanent focus on diversity, equity, and inclusive excellence as a deeply understood shared priority among campus leaders at all levels" (D13-8). This same institution implemented a day-long training specifically for campus leadership, entitled "Cultivating Inclusive Leadership," where the introductory comments from campus leadership noted that "inclusion is a key competency for leadership in academia" and "nothing works without inclusive leadership" (F7-2). Diversity work not only relies upon leadership, but also seems intent on positioning itself as a "key competency" for leadership itself.

Leadership's centrality in diversity work might be self-evident, in the sense that leaders are already positionally oriented as central to organizational activity writ large. However, diversity work's bifurcation of human actors from the organization, and the dilemma this bifurcation presents in envisioning organizational change, helps to explain the persistent preoccupation with the actions of leaders. By spanning the organization/human divide, positional leaders signify an attempted resolution to the bifurcation and the concerns arising from it. This unique position in relation to the organization/human bifurcation also lends insight into leadership's implicit connection to the metaphorical table. The ability of positional leaders to traverse the bifurcation of organization and individual, and to translate action into organizational change, suggests that positional leaders might occupy the same horizon as the table, or at least the promise of transcendence it implies.

Yet, leaders are distinguished from other organizational members in diversity work, bolstered by hierarchy and access to certain resources afforded by their position. Carla, who serves as a diversity and inclusivity manager for a large nonprofit, laments the difficulty in accessing leadership, and the tables they inhabit, in order to create meaningful change in the organization: “I wish they would just be more open to taking the suggestions and inviting me to the tables where I can have the most impact in the way they say they want it” (I3-24). For Carla, leadership occupies the most impactful positions, and tables, within the organization to further diversity work, limiting opportunities to transcend the personal journey to affect organizational change. One approaches the metaphorical table in diversity work to find leadership already seated. Rather than resolve the bifurcation of organization and human actors, diversity work positions leadership as brokering the divide, and mediating possibilities for others to approach the table.

Leadership’s distinction as positionally and hierarchically apart from other organizational members therefore means that leadership does not resolve the gap between individual and organization, but merely bridges it. In eliciting leadership, this attempted bridging also reinforces the gap itself, ensuring the bifurcation will stay in place by framing leadership as the locus of power and change in the organization, and maintaining human actors and the organization as separate entities. Positional leaders maintain a capacity to alter systems, design culture, and steward climate, activities that remain beyond the purview of other organizational members as depicted in diversity work. In other words, diversity work necessarily invokes leadership as an attempted resolution to its bifurcation of the organization and human actors, a divide which organizational members are framed as unable to resolve themselves. Such a dynamic contributes to leadership’s edification as a necessary element of diversity work, without resolving the issues

arising from the bifurcation. With leadership's inhabitation of the metaphorical table, the promise of the table as a mode of being, and the not-yet potentialities that it holds, therefore remain elusive in diversity work. Leadership's centrality creates relations of dependency and limits a capacity for action in diversity work, ensuring the organization/individual bifurcation, and the inequities it contributes to, persist.

### ***Orienting to Leadership at the Table: Agency and Dependency***

Diversity work's edification of leadership contributes to a notion of achieving organizational change that maps back to positional hierarchy. Within such a framework, the further away one is from positional leadership, the further away an individual engaging in diversity work is from affecting change, and therefore the wider the gulf between the organization and the individual. Even in efforts to distribute leadership and empower organizational members, formal leadership often remains the focal point, reifying the centrality of organizational hierarchy. During field observations of a diversity and inclusion session that sought to help people "personalize" the higher education institution's diversity, inclusion, and equity strategic plan draft, session leaders made an effort to frame all attendees as leaders: "nobody owns inclusion efforts at the university, it's on all of us" (F6-5). Attendees were seated at round tables with eight chairs, and the session leaders explained to attendees, who were a mix of staff, faculty, and students, that an executive administrator would be assigned to each table, and would rotate periodically throughout the session. Before the table discussions about the draft strategic plan began, the session leaders asserted that even with an executive administrator at the table, "it's not about hierarchy, you're all leaders" (F6-5).

Despite these assertions from the session leaders, the event itself reified positional leadership in various ways. The initial presenters noted that the strategic plan draft, the very



centerpiece of the session and table discussions, was “awaiting approval” from the campus leadership cabinet (F6-4). Once the table discussions commenced, several of the executive administrators began the conversation with a desire to hear the opinions of everyone else in the group: “[the executive administrator] indicates that she wants to hear the perspectives from the table, because she feels a need to advocate for issues of diversity and inclusion” (F6-5). Such comments helped shape what the conversation could be about, and what purpose the discussion served in terms of gleaning information from organizational members. As the event progressed, the executives were periodically asked by the session leaders to rotate to a new table, abruptly stopping any current conversations. The table discussions would then reset once a new campus leader joined the group.

The session’s stated goals indicated an intention to empower ownership of an institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion plan, and prompt engagement in questions of infrastructure and climate. Note how the physical (and metaphorical) table arrives on the scene as an important mediator and convener that orients people to collaborative discussion, making possible efforts to move beyond the personal journey in diversity work towards a horizon of organizational change. Yet the session ultimately reasserts leadership’s centrality at the discussion table: administrative leaders guide the purpose, content, and tenor of the conversation, and it is leadership who will ultimately decide whether or not to approve the diversity and inclusion strategic plan. Despite the session presenters’ intentions, positional leadership remained the focal point of diversity work, as attendees oriented their bodies and attention to each of the administrative leaders seated at the table. Maintaining a focus on leadership bifurcates positional leaders from other organizational members, and further reifies the separation of organization and human, where the positional leader simultaneously traverses, reinforces, and mediates the divide.

Diversity work's orientation towards leadership helps to ensure that diversity work hinges upon leadership support, limiting notions of achieving change in diversity work and enacting relations of dependency. Potential resistance to diversity work from leadership can therefore constitute a significant barrier to advancing aims of diversity, equity, and inclusion. During field observations of an organization's day-long racial equity training, at one point members of the leadership team openly questioned material about white supremacy culture that the facilitators presented (F3). The following week, during the organization's inclusion and diversity committee debrief session, multiple employees noted the difficulty that leadership's questioning presented. In referencing a related document on white supremacy culture that the presenters used, one committee member observed: "two people on the C-level invalidated it in front of everyone" (F1-5). Another member said that she did not want to participate in the training activity with the leaders who seemed to question the content, noting: "I can't lose my job" (F1-6). When discussing the impact of leadership's perceived resistance, others in the meeting argued that "you can't just take your title off" and "you can't change how leadership feels in the room" (F1-6). Here, diversity work responds to and orients around leadership in ways that set positional leaders apart from other organizational members. During the committee meeting, many members agreed that they would have reacted differently to the comments in the training if they had been made by people who were not in leadership positions. Leadership circulates in a training space as a physical presence, an organizational title, and a feeling, among many other entifications, that inflect diversity work and impact organizational relations and behaviors. In this case, an orientation around leadership's resistance results in stress, frustration, fear, and determination related to engaging in diversity work, shaping how diversity work proceeded in the organization.

Leadership is therefore capable of helping to both facilitate and inhibit organizational change and action in diversity work. This extends to ways of envisioning what organizational change can look like. In my interview with Abby, one of the volunteer leaders of her organization's diversity and inclusion committee, she discusses issues of attrition and diversity among staff, framing the problem in relation to leadership:

**Abby:** ...if we're in a rush just to say, "let's bring in diverse talent," but we don't create an environment that makes anyone feel inclusive, then we're actually shooting ourselves in the foot. We've had people of color leave and they're leaving for a reason. And we're not showing that we have leadership of color, or that is supportive of this. So it's just- it feels like we have an uphill battle because of the structures in place. And the people.

**Sean:** Yeah. And so the people thing is people who aren't creating an inclusive environment for people of color, and the structures are- what would you say are the structures that are pushing people of color out?

**Abby:** Yeah, it's that there...It's that there is nobody in leadership that represents them. That speaks out for efforts of equity and inclusion in the organization. Nobody in leadership. And it's that they are tokenized." (I2-12&13)

Abby goes on to say that "our leadership team lacking diversity is one of the biggest issues" (I2-14). Abby's discussion of organizational change evinces the metonymic slide of leadership to organization and structure, where increasing diversity among the leadership team translates to creating structural and environmental changes in the organization. Such a vision of organizational change in diversity work relies heavily upon leadership, and specifically change within the composition of the leadership team.

With leadership positioned as the pivotal means of attaining organizational change, diversity work becomes about accessing leadership and the metaphorical table that positional leaders occupy, activating relations of dependency in diversity work. Kate, an organizational diversity and inclusion consultant, notes that diversity work often lacks positional leadership, creating an emphasis on existing hierarchical leaders in the organization in order to obtain resources:

I've heard a lot of DEI professionals internally who've had a real difficulty because they have expectations on impact, but they really aren't given the resources to implement that. It's a bigger problem. It's sort of like, "How do I convince leadership that this needs budget?" is a question we hear a lot. (I5-7)

Positional leadership signifies access to the influence, time, and resources necessary to create organizational change. Yet, Kate's comment reveals that a positional leader in diversity work is often lacking in many organizations. Leadership eludes diversity work even as diversity work edifies it, resulting in a continual appeal for leadership support. Within such a relationship of dependency, access to leadership and the decision-making tables that leaders inhabit becomes a central preoccupation. Carla, a diversity and inclusivity manager within her institution, expresses her frustration with gaining access to the organization's department head meetings: "give me access to the department head meetings so I can like fluidly be meeting with them. So some of the things I've done was I've been able to push my way into meetings, right, and share and communicate" (I3-25). A significant part of Carla's efforts include pushing her way into meetings in order to access positional leadership and advance organizational diversity work, an effort that has taken its toll on Carla's energy and engagement in diversity work:

**Carla:** Invite me into spaces where I don't have to bust through the door. You know, I'm constantly trying to convince them. And I say "I'm no longer doing the Oliver Twist version of equity. I will no longer beg for crumbs."

**Sean:** "I want some more."

**Carla:** Right, like "Please, sir, can I have more crumbs for equity?" We're done with that. I am done with the convincing portion of the program. Are you in or are you out? (I3-23&24)

A preoccupation with access results in frustration and exhaustion for Carla, who likens herself to the character Oliver Twist, an impoverished young boy in a Charles Dickens novel who pleads for more food in order to survive. Leadership's centrality suddenly casts diversity work as a starving child, at the foot of the table, or perhaps at the door to the meeting room, begging for crumbs in the form of resources and time to continue diversity work.

Relations of dependency and access therefore help to shape diversity work's preoccupations, and the kinds of objects towards which it orients. Diversity work delineates the terms upon which organizational change can happen, positioning the ability to affect change within a narrow view of leadership. The prized position that leaders inhabit as a metonym for organization, spanning the organization/individual bifurcation, in turn contributes to concerns about access and dependency in diversity work. Meanwhile, "outside" of leadership, diversity work calls upon organizational members to "own their own work," and engage in their own personal journey of consciousness raising and education. The isolation of the personal journey helps to ensure that leadership-as-organization remains a linchpin for organizational change in diversity work, and envisioning what change can be and look like in the first place.

Attention to metaphors of the organizational environment and the personal journey reveal that the bifurcation contributes to a host of problems for organizational members engaging in diversity work. A compartmentalization of diversity work and a politics of measurement lead to differential embodiment, labor, and legitimacy for organizational members coded as diverse. While conceptualizations of positional leadership attempt to address the bifurcation, they do not resolve it, and in fact contribute to the bifurcation's continued presence by mediating the divide between organization and individual.

Twinned attention to leadership and the metaphorical table help to reveal how diversity work efforts revolve around the table as organizational imaginary. Diversity work seems to long for the table, and orients towards the table as an imagined horizon capable of transcending the bifurcation of organization and human actors: a meeting point where individual action manifests organizational change. Leadership's occupation of the metaphorical table in turn orients diversity work, keeping the table cordoned in the boardroom or the "C-suite," forever out of reach and

under lock and key by positional leaders. As a result, diversity work must constantly reference positional leadership as necessary.

Diversity work's frequent exclusion from positional leadership may lead to calls for more leadership positions specifically dedicated to diversity, equity, and inclusion. While undoubtedly this may assist in achieving desired changes, leadership's complicity in perpetuating inequitable relations would remain. The framing of leadership as a primary reference point for organizational change produces a narrow view of agency that limits possibilities for engaging in diversity work and addressing issues of organizational oppression and inequality. An emphasis on leadership, revealed in part by the metaphorical table and concomitant relations of access and dependency, distracts from examining daily practices of diversity work as consequential to constituting lived realities, and inequities, in work and organizing. Such a move might unravel notions of the organizational container and individual journey as separate, and reveal "the table" to be everywhere that organizing occurs.

### **Kaleidoscopic Conclusions**

Kaleidoscopic inquiry into normative practices and accounts of diversity work reveal a multitude of bifurcations that ultimately serve to separate human actors from what is understood to be the organization. Such divisions contribute to particular social orders in organizing that contribute to the very inequities that diversity work purports to address, while also stymying conceptualizations of agency that might help to undo them. In seeking to understand normative sensemaking at play in accounts of diversity work (RQ1), I have trained kaleidoscopic attention to the prominent metaphors of journey, container, and table, and traced their dynamic relationships to normative practices of trainings, data collection, and positional leadership (RQ2).

From this analysis of sensemaking and practice emerges a more nuanced view of inequitable relations at play in diversity work and organizing (RQ3).

Diversity work framed as a personal journey, wherein the organization serves as a container that provides the ideal conditions for such a journey, reveals an underlying ontological bifurcation separating organizational members from nonhuman actors, casting diversity work as an individual and largely internal endeavor. Not only does an ontological bifurcation obscure the multitude of relations that constitute diversity work and organizing, it also facilitates additional divisions that contribute to inequitable relations. Perhaps the most significant among these is a bifurcation of work. The personalization of diversity work, as well as a politics of measurement that seeks to quantitatively assess diversity and inclusion within the bounds of a contained environment, contribute to a separation and isolation of diversity work within organizing. The metaphors of journey and container, operationalized through practices like trainings and quantitative data collection, also help to separate and spotlight organizational members with marginalized identities in diversity work, contributing to additional scrutiny, labor, and responsibility in comparison to privileged identities. Unfortunately, a bifurcation of work means that the additional labor asked of individuals coded as diverse goes largely unrecognized and can even negatively impact their chances for promotions and raises. The resulting bifurcation of expertise therefore leads to a dead end of sorts for marginalized individuals called to engage in diversity work.

Normative practices in diversity work therefore contribute to the very same relations of inequity that diversity work attempts to address. What is more, an ability to disrupt such inequitable relations is stymied by a limited view of agency proffered by positional leadership and the metaphorical table. For most organizational members, diversity work frames agency

within the context of the personal journey, where it remains the individual's responsibility to change themselves for diversity work. Leadership arrives on the scene with a more expansive capacity for agency: as an actor capable of translating individual action to organizational change. While providing a means of bridging the separation of organization and individual in order to achieve meaningful change in diversity work, organizational leaders maintain exclusive access to such conceptualizations of agency. This helps to ensure that organizational members remain dependent upon leaders for addressing inequity in organizing.

At the heart of this narrow view of agency, as well as the inequitable relations to which diversity work contributes, is a bifurcation of human actors from nonhuman actors: an inability to see the complex and dynamic relations that constitute diversity work, organizing, and the social orders produced under their signs. Disrupting this ontological bifurcation might provide opportunities to unseat diversity work from ways of accounting and practice that (re)produce inequitable dynamics, and might reveal diversity work's capacity to be a more equitable and bountiful otherwise.

### **Conclusion**

This thesis has mobilized a queer approach to the study, analysis, and explication of organizational diversity work. The persistence of organizational inequities, in spite of and sometimes exacerbated by concerted efforts to engage in diversity work, necessitates frameworks that can durably interrogate and disrupt the organizational status quo. I argue that a queer orientation to norms and normativity productively extends extant scholarship on diversity work, particularly in attending to practice and addressing normative logics that reproduce inequities. To this end, I have developed kaleidoscope as a queer methodology for organizational field research that takes normative relations as its point of inquiry. This project and the resulting analysis reveal



a persistent bifurcation of the “individual” and “organizational” in diversity work that perniciously reinscribes inequitable relations in organizing. Organizational members take the main stage as they navigate the “personal journey” of diversity work, whereas the organization disappears to the background as the mere container for individual exploration. Leadership emerges as a key figure capable of spanning this ontological divide by translating individual action to organizational change, yet the enshrinement of positional leadership leaves the bifurcation intact and stymies other opportunities for enacting organizational change at the level of practice.

In this concluding section, I first seek to reflect on this project’s findings in relation to diversity work theory, research, and practice. Grounded in my discussion of both scholarship and practice, I address the limitations and opportunities for future research that this thesis presents. I then explore the implications of queering diversity work for the field of organizational communication more broadly. I argue that kaleidoscopic inquiry not only troubles scholarly and practical considerations of diversity work, but also challenges organization and organizing as conceptual and material constructions around which the field of organizational communication coheres. Addressing these dynamics takes seriously the notion that “whiteness and colonialism are organizational communication” (Harris, 2019, p. 5), and that queer *disorganization* might be one way to disrupt white supremacy in the field

### **Queering Diversity Work**

Following Ahmed’s (2012) interrogation of diversity work in higher education, this project queerly contends with “what diversity can and does do” in organizational settings, and what interests are served in that doing (p. 1). As a discourse and a practice, diversity work shapes organizational activity, drawing upon and enacting normative relations that render labor and life

chances differentially across social identities. Taking a queer approach that centers norms and normative relations surfaces both a pernicious ontological bifurcation and its costly price, inscribing and reinforcing inequities and attempting to limit a capacity for organizational action. Kaleidoscopic inquiry extends extant practice-based scholarship, reveals logics of whiteness and coloniality at play in diversity work, and presents opportunities for practitioner intervention that prompt different relational potentialities.

### ***Diversity Work Theory and Research***

Queering diversity work helps to reveal that the normative bifurcation of individual and organization is central to how diversity work is constituted, even as this bifurcation ensures diversity work's limitations and maintains the organizational status quo. This finding extends the work of other scholars who have investigated ontological divides that arise in diversity work research and organizational practice. Janssens and Steyaert (2019) argue that diversity research, arising from Western social theoretical traditions, operates under a dualism constituted by individualist and societist stances. The individualist stance rests in mentalism or a cognitive approach where the unit of analysis is individual behavior and interaction, whereas the societist stance focuses on discursive phenomena outside of the individual. My research finds that the ontological dualism that exists at the level of diversity work theory and research to some extent reflects sensemaking by organizational members in relation to enacting diversity work. Janssens and Steyaert's (2019) exploration of the psychological focus of the individualist stance is not unlike the internal and personal journey organizational members are encouraged to undertake as a part of diversity work. Training sessions that conceptually assert individual forms of oppression as distinct from structural or institutional oppression further underscore a societist stance that is separate from diversity work as an internal journey. Importantly, this empirical

project lends insights into how such a bifurcation arises in situ, rather than in the literature, and what varied effects emerge from such practices to affect diversity work as an organizational phenomenon.

Shifting from scholars to practitioners, Mease (2016) notes that diversity consultants also navigate the disjuncture between organization and individual when it comes to envisioning change in diversity work. While consultants argue for broad organizational change, Mease (2016) finds that they largely conceptualize this change as happening on an individual level due to a lack of resources and limited access. Mease (2016) defines the toggling between individual and organizational change as a discursive tension, one that is tentatively resolved by viewing individual change as a starting point to affecting other processes. For Mease (2016), “this paradoxical focus on organizational and individual change does not mark a fissure in two different kinds of diversity work, but rather a point of possibility, where organizational change can be thought of in terms of individual change and vice versa” (p. 75). While not necessarily resolving the tension, kaleidoscopic inquiry further challenges the categories of individual and organizational as stable and unproblematic. A queer reading reveals that normative constructions of individual and organization, and the collective maintenance of their cleaving, ensures a particular inequitable social order finds footing and perseveres.

Perhaps more than extending the extant scholarship on ontological dualisms in diversity work, this study provides greater understanding as to the varied effects that arise from the social orders brought into relation under diversity work’s bifurcations. Attending to these effects brings into relief broader normative logics such as whiteness and coloniality in organizing. On one level, diversity work’s emphasis on the individual via the metaphorical “journey” further isolates the individual as the responsible party for diversity work, contributing to the “intensified

individualization of responsibility and failure” (Ashcraft, 2017, p. 39) characteristic of work in the era of neoliberalism. As the organization falls from view into the background, so too does its complicity in inhibiting diversity work’s stated aims of anti-oppression and equity. The ontological bifurcation and subsequent spotlighting of the individual’s personal journey therefore situates diversity work as another mode of organizational control: “What was once considered private, namely the workers’ thoughts, feelings, and emotions, now routinely serve as fodder for organizational and managerial interventions” (Tracy & Tretheway, 2005, p. 172). Further, the exclusive turn inward towards one’s own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs sets the parameters for agency in diversity work, wherein a broader capacity for change remains under the purview of positional leadership alone.

More than shoring up modes of organizational and managerial control, diversity work’s emphasis on individualism serves as a continuation of Eurocentric and American ideological systems that edify a view of the discrete and stable modern human subject (Cruz & Sodeke, 2020). The enshrinement and classification of the individual is an architecture of othering rooted in Western ways of knowing that draw distinctions between subject and object, human and nonhuman. As Taylor (2020) argues, “The colonialist project coproduced systems of rational thought in which the isolated, individuated subject came into being as a product of his own self-recognition, turning all else into an object of knowledge to be mastered and controlled” (p. 24). Diversity work reinforces such distinctions along colonial lines of difference between European subjects and non-European Others (Mignolo, 2007). As the white, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied subject sets out on their diversity work journey, organizational members with marginalized identities shift from journey-goers to guides, becoming teachable objects who assist those with privilege. The journey, which forever orients spatiotemporally towards a future

horizon, suggests that those unable to access the journey are also unable to access its attendant organizational capacity and futurity. Similar to rights-based discourses, diversity work activities can be said to “discriminate which bodies are vested with futurity, or more accurately, they cultivate (some/certain) bodies that can be vested with futurity” (Puar, 2017, p. 15). While foreclosing a journey and the organizational future it promises for some, diversity practices can further serve to erase those who do not even register as diverse, and yet cannot claim the privileges associated with cisheterosexual able-bodied whiteness in organizing. In accordance with data collection practices, identities marked as diverse receive some measure of organizational funding and support, whereas those erased, conflated, or unwilling to be tracked – such as Indigenous, queer, and dis/ability identities – are rendered organizationally nonexistent.

In organizational contexts rooted in white privilege, coloniality, and white supremacy (Frenkel & Shenhav; Nkomo & Al Ariss, 2014; Rosenthal, 2018), a queer view of diversity work reveals how a normative bifurcation of individual and organization reproduces the inequitable organizational status quo. Ahmed (2012) has similarly noted the ironic nature of diversity work, wherein “an equality regime can be an inequality regime given new form, a set of processes that maintain what is supposedly being redressed” (p. 8). Kaleidoscopic inquiry reveals that diversity work produces social orders with effects that fall differentially on bodies depending upon social identity, contributing to normative regimes of whiteness and coloniality. Diversity work can therefore be understood as a technology of organization, wherein organization is understood as a mode of coloniality, a logic of whiteness.

Kaleidoscopic inquiry, which mobilizes a queer approach to norms and normative relations while also attending to organizational sociohistorical contexts, serves as a vital means of naming and addressing the status quo in diversity work research and scholarship. This aligns

with Christensen's (2018) norm-critical approach to diversity training, which aims for "denaturalising and hence repoliticising dominant norms as a contingent and contested terrain by means of explicating the norms" (Christensen, 2018, p. 113). In this study, metaphors have provided a window into normative constructions at play in diversity work and organizing, serving as an entry point for kaleidoscopic inquiry. Like Schoeneborn and others (2019), I find utility in studying metaphors "for their ontological consequences—for instance, their role in creating and sustaining organizations and organizational phenomena" (p. 5). A queer attention to normative constructions embedded in the metaphors of journey, container, and table allows for a more durable interrogation of the organizational status quo and the logics of whiteness and coloniality embedded within it. Even as whiteness arises as the implicit benefactor of the diversity work journey, the container and auditor of diversity work activity, and the a priori resident of the metaphorical table, its normative presence falls away from view as "just the way things are." Norm-inquiry assists in bringing attention to normative logics like whiteness that gain their power, in part, from appearing as obvious and neutral. Queer draws focus to "what recedes when diversity becomes a view" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 14).

The centrality of diversity work practices and normative relations in a queer kaleidoscopic approach reveals that practice is critical to norm inquiry and disruption. This aligns with Janssens and Steyaert's (2019) assertion that ontological reflection is foundational "for retheorizing diversity in organizations" (p. 529). Among nascent efforts to apply practice-based approaches to diversity work, queer theorizing might serve as a productive heuristic. This study might further model ways of addressing what Kuhn (2020) terms "blind spots" of practice-based theorizing in organization studies. Such limitations include an inability to adequately question the ontological stability of the organization, understand agency beyond human activity,

and theorize power, control, and resistance (Kuhn, 2020). By specifically interrogating how diversity work conceptualizes organization and delimits agency, and exploring how this affects the way power operates organizationally in service of whiteness and coloniality, kaleidoscopic inquiry illustrates the potential of queer theorizing to extend practice-based theorizing in organization studies.

Attention to practice can also add nuance to a queer approach to organizational norms and how they operate. Janssens and Steyaert (2019) describe how examining the entanglement of the material, discursive, and embodied inherent in diversity practices can reveal normative social orders: “it is through focusing on the particular sociomaterial entanglement – how these elements hang together and prevent or reproduce normativities – that diversity scholars will be able to better understand how a particular practice accomplishes a particular social order” (p. 531). Understanding how norms and normativities emerge and operate on the granular level of daily practice can further ground and lend focus to queer studies of diversity work.

Kaleidoscopic inquiry therefore models the generative opportunities that arise when intentionally bringing queer theorizing and attention to practice to bear in organizational research. Similar to practice-based theorizing, queer theories could also be said to orient towards “ontological multiplicity” through norm critique (Kuhn, 2020, p. 7). Queer theory introduces a political bent towards this acknowledgement of multiplicity and the normative constraints that often foil its emergence. For queer scholars, multiplicity inherently implicates “an opening up of what counts as a life worth living” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 178). Mobilizing queer theory in organizational research through kaleidoscopic inquiry therefore positions queer as a resistive orientation against fixity: queer as an orientation of refusal, and the horizon of potentiality that such a refusal breaks open (Muñoz, 2009). Building from Ahmed (2006), a queer orientation

rejects the normative lines that prescribe ways of being and knowing in organizing. Norms, which may be viewed as technologies that seek to order and organize a coherent reality, can paradoxically inhibit the inhabitation of such a reality for some: norms cleave as they knit. Attention to norms and a queer refusal of the oppressive social orders they currently produce can be one means of providing “the condition of possibility for another way of dwelling in the world” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 178).

#### *Limitations and future research*

As a multi-site qualitative research project focused on diversity work, this study attempts to identify norms that arise across a variety of organizational forms and contexts, including for profit, nonprofit, government, and higher education. While providing a broad scope of analysis that examines diversity work in the United States, different and valuable insights could be gleaned by conducting a longer-term study situated in a single organizational setting. Such analysis would provide an opportunity to examine the nuances of factors like geographic region, organizational sector, industry, and size in influencing how diversity work is practiced and what norms arise. A longer amount of time in a singular field site could also allow a researcher greater attention to shifts in sensemaking and practice over time. Due to travel limitations, the data collected in participant observation was largely focused on Colorado and the Denver metro area. While I attempted to conduct interviews and analyze documents that extended this reach to other parts of the country, additional insights could certainly be gained from participant observation in different geographic locations as well.

Ideally, this project can serve as a means of opening new opportunities for conducting queer qualitative research in organization studies. McDonald (2017) has outlined foundational commitments for engaging queer theory methodologically in qualitative research, though he



notes that much of the queer scholarship in organization studies is conceptual in nature. While queer “re-readings” of existing studies are undoubtedly important in furthering analysis, opportunities remain to more fundamentally integrate queer commitments into empirical research projects. To this end, Ashcraft and Muhr (2018) propose promiscuous coding as a means of queering data collection and analysis, which provides a hopeful outline of what queer qualitative methods might entail. My hope is that kaleidoscope as queer methodology serves as a fruitful heuristic for future qualitative projects seeking to mobilize queer theory. Such an approach foregrounds norms and normative relations as the primary locus of inquiry, observed via organizational practice. Kaleidoscopic inquiry might serve as a point of departure for identifying how other instances of organizational sensemaking and practice create similar bifurcations between organization and individual via communication. Importantly, even as researchers attend to the granular level of daily practice, the sociohistorical context of organizations and organizing must be taken into account, necessitating a coalitional approach that engages with other critical frameworks like critical race and decolonial theorizing. As a coalitional mode of analysis, this allows for identifying how norms arising in daily practice can operate in service to broader normative regimes like whiteness and coloniality.

### ***Practicing Diversity Work***

For practitioners and organizational members engaging in diversity work, a queer approach aids in surfacing norms in everyday organizational activity that shape action even as they escape notice and definition. Following Ahmed (2019), kaleidoscopic inquiry provides an opportunity for a mode of “queer furnishing” that surfaces and makes strange the normative and often invisible: “A queer furnishing might be about making what is in the background, what is behind us, more available as ‘things’ to ‘do’ things with” (p. 168). If the ontological bifurcation

instantiated by diversity work can be named, it can also be addressed and disrupted; it can be transformed from inequity to organizational capacity for doing diversity work and organizing differently. Certainly, any effort to identify equitable practices is fraught when attempted in absence of the localized setting wherein diversity work is situated (Janssens & Steyaert, 2019). What follows is therefore a tentative discussion of queer (dis)orientations and questions that might serve as productive heuristics for deviating from the ontological bifurcation and the inequitable relations that result from it.

Kaleidoscopic inquiry reveals that diversity work implicitly defines, and therefore delimits, what counts as diversity work, and what range of actions are possible given these constraints. As a “journey,” diversity work is often cast as an individualized and personal affair. In this context, the organization as “container” has very little bearing on one’s individual journey, other than providing the backdrop and ideal conditions for such a journey to occur. In an attempt to affect larger organizational change, individuals might seek access to “the table,” or organizational leadership. For practitioners, this leaves little room for agency outside changing the self, unless the organizational member happens to be in a senior leadership position in an organization.

Attending to organizational practice might therefore start with first recognizing the normative relations that diversity work occasions, and how such relations reify the organizational status quo and the power of positional leadership. Understanding the potential effects of a bifurcation of the organization and individual might instead prompt a more expansive understanding of organizational agency and diversity work that acknowledges the enmeshment of human and nonhuman actors. Deviating from the normative relations prescribed by diversity work allows for enacting different kinds of relations, and bringing about new and otherwise ways

of being. As Ahmed (2006) intones, “risking departure from the straight and narrow makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer” (p. 21). Rather than viewing “the table,” and the capacity for action that it implies, as being under the purview and control of organizational leadership, practitioners might instead understand the table otherwise: what constitutes organization and the opportunity for organizational change is the enmeshment of all human and nonhuman actors in a given scene. Such a shift might unseat leadership as the necessary reference point, to instead see the articulation of meaningful change happening at a multitude of nodal points. In other words, far from being kept away in the boardroom, the table is everywhere that organizing occurs. Rather than asking “how can we get a seat at the table,” organizational members might fruitfully ask “who and what is at the table we inhabit in this moment, and what opportunities for care, concern, anti-oppression, and equity might this moment provide?” If, as Ahmed (2006) argues, “A table acquires a life through how it arrives, through what it comes into contact with, and the work that it allows us to do” (p. 164), then perhaps altering one’s relationship to the metaphorical table might occasion different enactments that disrupt diversity work’s bifurcation and the inequities it produces.

Diversity training occasions further opportunities for suspending normative practices and the organizational status quo, allowing for different ways of organizing and coordinating action to emerge (Mease, 2016). For example, Christensen (2018) details an introductory diversity training activity where the facilitators define key terms with a focus on the privileged, normative identities that largely go unmarked in day-to-day organizational activity, such as cisgender and heterosexual, rather than spotlighting and dwelling LGBTQ+ identities. In so doing, the training helps to “make the participants literate in discussing diversity issues in relation to norms,” including prompting participants with normative identities to better understand their own

positionalities (Christensen, 2018, p. 119). Christensen's (2018) important work provides insights into how a deconstructive approach might help interrogate normative regimes like white supremacy in organizing, though his work leaves open the question of how diversity training might shift away from an individualizing stance towards a more relational view of affecting organizational change. Below are questions that organizational members might fruitfully explore in diversity training sessions, planning meetings, or in daily practices as a first step towards a disruption of the ontological bifurcation:

- How do your work experiences, relationships, and practices shape what diversity work can be here?
  - What are the people and things implicated in that shaping?
- Collectively identify a practice in your daily work: what organizational norms shape this practice, or, what counts as normal for this practice?
  - Who and what is involved in creating this “normal”?
  - Who and what does this normal exclude?
  - Who and what does that normal work for?
- What becomes possible in how we relate, act, and think when certain organizational norms are changed, disrupted, or deviated from?
  - What bodies, things, and relationships might be involved in that deviation?
- What might collective (rather than individual) accountability look like as we engage in diversity work?

Again, rather than a prescriptive list or guide, I provide the above questions as one starting point among many for returning to the situated and embodied daily practices of diversity work, and the varied human and nonhuman actors implicated in these practices. Such work attempts to recuperate as sense of self as deeply embedded within relations to human and nonhuman actors that constitute organizing: kaleidoscope as a dynamic and relational plane of being and situated experience. Recognizing and disrupting the bifurcation as it arises in various practices allows for a generative deviation that opens up to an otherwise horizon, one imbued with potentiality (Muñoz, 2009).

### **Disorganizing Organizational Communication**

Beyond examining diversity work research, theory, and practice, my hope is that the interrogation of diversity work in this thesis might point to opportunities for deviating and disorganizing the broader field of organizational communication. Normative inquiry into diversity work reveals that it is impossible to separate the organization and the individual, despite the many scholarly and practical technologies that attempt to do so, opening up new possibilities for undoing, relating, and thriving in organizing and work. What is more, the continued maintenance of this bifurcation extends beyond enactments of diversity work and helps to reify organizational inequities. Diversity work therefore uncovers new ways of understanding work and organization.

Of course, the field of organizational communication is far from a neutral actor in the maintenance of such normative conceptualizations of organization and the inequities that arise in academia and organizing at large. The Organizational Communication Top Paper Panel walkout at the 2019 National Communication Association revealed the ways in which whiteness is embedded in academic practices, and the challenges associated with resisting such inequities (Gist-Mackey, 2020). Speaking broadly about bias in the field and the influences of networks, scholarly identification, and routines that center Euro-American scholars, Cheney (2000) argued that “Along a number of dimensions, organizational communication can be thought to suppress difference” (p. 136). A queer approach to diversity work therefore presents a challenge to what counts as organizational, and the norms that undergird organization and organizing.

For example, in her study of diversity work consultants, Mease (2016) notes a tension in diversity work between what she defines as organizational and social justice imperatives: “If one gives up attention to social inequality, one is a management consultant; without attention to organizational imperatives, one is an activist” (p. 64). In tracing the history of diversity work,

Mease (2016) indicates that “organizational imperatives” imply increased profit and productivity. For Mease (2016), the discursive tension between organization and social justice imperatives is “a defining feature of diversity work” (p. 76). If social justice and organizational aims are at odds, this begs the question: towards what ends do organization and organizing orient? In other words, what is the purpose and telos of organizing? The whiteness and coloniality of organizations, in which modern organizing is rooted in white supremacy, slavery, and colonial projects (Cooke, 2003; Frenkel & Shenhav, 2006; Harris, 2019; Nkomo & Al Ariss, 2014), suggests that organization as a modern construction mobilizes a particular social order, a reality and way of being normalized through practice. Put another way, organization is useful to coloniality and whiteness.

More comprehensively contending with the ontology of organization and the sociohistorical context of organizing signifies an effort to contend with whiteness and coloniality. Organizational communication’s reticence to interrogate its own ontological assumptions and understand how those assumptions are bound up with the racist and colonial histories of modern organizing means that the field itself is complicit in perpetuating such harmful and oppressive logics that ensure the status quo prevails. A refusal to follow and orient towards such normative lines might signify an opportunity to do organization differently: to *disorganize* as a mode of being and working against regimes of whiteness and coloniality, and as a means of “constituting otherwise ways of being in the world” (Crawley, 2020, p. 29).

Ahmed (2012) asserts that “we need to keep asking what we are doing with diversity” (p. 17), and this research project underscores the importance of diversity for not only diversity work, but the field of organizational communication as well. Queerly tracing how ontological separations arise and the varied effects they enact on organizing can provide an additional means

of addressing normative regimes like whiteness, coloniality, and cisheteropatriarchy that are suffused in organizing and the field of organizational communication. Diversity work, and indeed all organizational work, must more consciously name and address such normative logics, in order to expand notions of agency and better strive for an equitable and anti-oppressive politics. Diversity work and organizing can, and must, be otherwise.

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## Appendix

### Interview Guide

Organizing diversity work: Understanding norms in organizational enactments of diversity, equity, and inclusion

#### Introductory script:

This study seeks to better understand how organizations make sense of what counts as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work, and what forms that work generally takes organizationally. In this interview, I am hoping to learn more about your own experiences engaging in organizational DEI work. Your name and any identifying information will be changed in any papers or presentations, to make sure no one can identify you with your answers.

Before we begin, do you have any questions?

Are you comfortable with me audio recording this conversation?

#### Demographic

1. What social identities are most salient and important for you (e.g., age, gender, sexuality, race, nationality, ability)?
  - a. Why and how have these become the most salient or important for you?
  - b. Are there identities that are less salient for you, or that you perhaps pay less attention to? Why?

#### DEI Work Generally

2. What does diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work mean to you?
  - a. From your experience, what does DEI work usually look like to you?
  - b. Can you provide an example?
  - c. How could DEI work be different? What do you wish DEI work could do that it doesn't seem to already do?
3. When you think of DEI work, what do you feel, and where do you feel it on your body?
4. Who or what does DEI work benefit?
  - a. Who/what doesn't?
5. Who is equipped to do DEI work?
6. What's the best part of DEI work?
  - a. What's the worst part?

#### DEI Work in Your Organization

7. What counts as DEI work in your organization?
  - a. What doesn't?
8. How would you characterize your organization's efforts in DEI work so far?
  - a. What is "business as usual" for DEI work in your organization?
9. How do you feel about your organization's emphasis on DEI work?
10. Ideally, what would your organization do to better engage in DEI work?
11. What do you think are challenges that get in the way of your organization from engaging in DEI work?
  - a. Is there a way to combat those challenges?



12. What are strengths or points of leverage for your organization in engaging in diversity work?
13. How does your organizational role define what DEI work you do?

**Conclusion**

14. Thank you so much for taking the time to share your opinion. Is there anything else that we might not have gotten a chance to talk about that you'd like to share?
15. What pseudonym would you like me to use for you in any written work or presentations about this research?
  - a. Please spell and pronounce it.
16. Are there any other people with DEI organizational roles that you think would be good to interview for this research project?