

Resistance, Performativity, and Fragmentation: The Relational Arena of EDI/D in Canadian Higher Education

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Article abstract

Equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonizing (EDI/D) have gained discursive centrality in Canadian higher education (HE) yet are criticized as performative. Donald's work on "ethical relationality" understands colonialism as a denial of relations. Drawing on this work I analyze EDI/D in HE through a lens of relationship building. The study maps three institutional layers of EDI/D. The external layer is centred on confronting overt critique, with discourses about EDI/D as threatening academic freedom becoming more prevalent. The second layer focuses on the "mainstream" adoption of EDI/D. EDI/D became central in terminology, but HE culture is more resistant to change. The inner layer includes those engaged with EDI/D. It is grounded in collaboration, but also in containment and fragmentation of EDI/D initiatives. These layers reveal institutional gaslighting tactics that derail meaningful engagement with EDI/D. For EDI/D to be transformative, HE institutions must ground EDI/D in the difficult process of relationship building.



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Abstract

Equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonizing (EDI/D) have gained discursive centrality in Canadian higher education (HE) yet are criticized as performative. Donald's work on "ethical relationality" understands colonialism as a denial of relations. Drawing on this work I analyze EDI/D in HE through a lens of relationship building. The study maps three institutional layers of EDI/D. The external layer is centred on confronting overt critique, with discourses about EDI/D as threatening academic freedom becoming more prevalent. The second layer focuses on the "mainstream" adoption of EDI/D. EDI/D became central in terminology, but HE culture is more resistant to change. The inner layer includes those engaged with EDI/D. It is grounded in collaboration, but also in containment and fragmentation of EDI/D initiatives. These layers reveal institutional gaslighting tactics that derail meaningful engagement with EDI/D. For EDI/D to be transformative, HE institutions must ground EDI/D in the difficult process of relationship building.

Keywords: equity, diversity, inclusion, ethical-relationality, higher education, case study

Résumé

L'équité, la diversité, l'inclusion et la décolonisation (EDI/D) ont acquis une centralité discursive dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur au Canada, mais sont critiquées pour leur caractère performatif. Les travaux de Donald (2009, 2021, 2022) sur la «relationnalité éthique» considèrent le colonialisme comme un déni des relations. En m'inspirant de ces travaux, j'analyse l'EDI/D dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur sous l'angle de l'établissement de relations. L'étude met en évidence trois strates institutionnelles d'EDI/D : la strate externe est centrée sur la confrontation à la critique ouverte, les discours sur l'EDI/D qui sont perçus comme une menace à la liberté universitaire étant de plus en plus répandus. La seconde strate se concentre sur l'adoption «générale» de l'EDI/D. L'EDI/D est devenue un élément central de la terminologie, mais la culture des établissements d'enseignement supérieur demeure résistante au changement. La troisième strate comprend ceux qui sont engagés dans l'EDI/D. Elle est fondée sur la collaboration, mais aussi sur le confinement et la fragmentation des initiatives d'EDI/D. Ces trois aspects révèlent les tactiques de manipulation des établissements d'enseignement supérieur qui font dérailler l'engagement significatif en faveur de l'EDI/D. Pour que l'EDI/D soit transformatrice, les établissements d'enseignement supérieur doivent l'ancrer dans le processus difficile d'établissement de relations.

Mots-clés : équité, diversité, inclusion, éthique relationnelle, enseignement supérieur, étude de cas

Introduction

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) became a pertinent issue for Canadian higher education (HE) in the 1980s, in grappling with a lingering history of exclusion and marginalization of people of equity seeking groups (ESGs)¹ (Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal, 2023; Blain, 2022; Bunjun, 2022; Douglas, 2022; F. Henry et al., 2017; Li et al., 2021; Smith, 2010, 2017). More recently, there has been a deepening consideration of colonialism within these dynamics and a focus on decolonization (EDI/D)² (Canada Research Chairs, 2019; Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 2021; University of Windsor, n.d.). Canadian HE institutions are criticized for constructing Western knowledge as neutral and universal while marginalizing Indigenous and non-Western knowledge systems (Donald, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Ross, 2022; Simpson, 2014). This epistemological hierarchy is tightly connected to embodied privilege and marginalization. When Western knowledge is deemed superior, those seen as embodying this knowledge are positioned as superior.

On a declarative level EDI/D is often centred in Canadian universities' mission statements, action plans, and performance reports (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). Yet, HE institutions are still resistant to make significant changes to their practices (Daigle, 2019; MacKenzie et al., 2023). Thobani (2022b) argues that universities use EDI/D strategically as a zone of containment to manage and control critical discourses and bodies (i.e., women/queer people of colour and Indigenous women) that challenge the racial and colonial structures of HE (p. 6). The prevalence of EDI/D discourses can act as "institutional gaslighting" (MacKenzie et al., 2023; Ruíz, 2020), a way to performatively embrace EDI/D "while simultaneously deploying strategies that prevent dismantling systemic inequalities" (Mackenzie et al., 2023, p.1).

EDI/D in HE also receives considerable pushback from the centre-right, particularly in the American context. Such discourses are increasingly prevalent in Canadian HE (Kaufmann, 2021; Lévesque, 2022). Critics argue that EDI/D issues have become an

1 EDI/D terminology evolves continuously (e.g., from "racial/minority groups" to "racialized and minoritized" to highlight the social construction of marginalization, then to "equity seeking groups" to focus on the strive for equity). Most recently it was suggested to use "equity deserving groups," pointing to equity as a human right. I use some of the later terminology interchangeably.

2 I use EDI/D to acknowledge that the relation between EDI and decolonizing is not seamless and that EDI has been criticized for sidelining the journey toward decolonization (Thobani, 2022a).

ideological dogma. This impacts the culture of academic inquiry and debate since academics avoid critiquing progressive ideas out of fear of “being cancelled” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; McWhorter, 2021, 2020; Norris, 2020).

It seems that EDI/D is at the centre of opposing discourses. From anti-racist and decolonizing perspectives, it is criticized as “diverting energies away from transformative possibilities” (Thobani, 2022b, p. 18); from the centre-right it is criticized as endangering academic freedom and a symptom of a “woke culture” (McWhorter, 2021).

In a time of growing societal and institutional divisiveness it is important to explore the relational arena of EDI/D. There is a body of literature critiquing the limited progress in EDI/D initiatives and the persistent barriers for people of ESGs in Canadian HE (Al Shaibah, 2023; Baker & Vasseur, 2021; Daigle, 2019; Douglas, 2022; F. Henry et al., 2017; MacKenzie et al., 2023; Smith, 2010; Thobani, 2022a, 2022b); however, there is limited research on navigating relations and tensions in the institution while engaging in EDI/D (Casado Pérez, 2019; Green, 2020).

Donald’s (2009, 2022) framing of “ethical relationality” ties epistemological questions to interpersonal ones. It is nested in the understanding of colonialism as a *denial of relations*. From this perspective, undoing the harm of colonial systems, including in HE, requires not only a change of terminology or policy but also a fundamental change in being with one another. This framing suggests that shortcomings in the implementation of EDI/D, as well as pushback against it, are nested in overt and subtle ways of relational denial. It is important to note that ethical relationality is not about individualizing EDI/D, as institutions tend to do via diversity workshops and anti-oppression training (Applebaum, 2019). Rather, it is about creating an institutional culture that is grounded in respect and reciprocity.

This study was triggered by my own experiences in various Canadian HE institutions in the last decade. During this time, I have participated in multiple EDI/D initiatives and experienced growing divisiveness around this work. To share one example, in the university under study there was an online debate regarding a “Canada Day sale” at the university bookstore. The discussion was whether Canada Day should be celebrated or cancelled in the aftermath of the discovery of the unmarked graves of Indigenous children, victims of Canadian residential schools (Dickson & Watson, 2021). In a matter of minutes, views escalated, and insults took over any potential for a critical discussion. Following Donald’s notion, this exchange should not be analyzed as an intellectual debate, but an

enactment of relations (or lack thereof). To unpack the relational arena of EDI/D, this study asks: In what ways do academics engaged with EDI/D navigate tensions and relations in HE? What does the relational arena reveal about the institutional approach to EDI/D?

I start by expanding on the theoretical framing of ethical relationality and review the literature on EDI/D in Canadian HE. I then present a case study of a university in British Columbia. The findings suggest that EDI/D initiatives demand ongoing engagement with relation building, which in turn calls for a move away from a technocratic approach to EDI/D.

Theoretical Framework

Scholars claim that universities incorporate discourses of diversity and social justice as “add-ons” (Zeichner & McDonald, 2009). EDI/D principles are often prevalent in terminology; yet HE institutions are grounded in White, middle-class norms and values (Thobani, 2022b). Superficial changes, such as multicultural celebrations and diversity workshops, are misleading because they convey an image of inclusivity without challenging academic structures that reproduce hierarchies and marginalization (Ahmed, 2012; Campbell, 2021; F. Henry et al., 2017).

Studies further demonstrate how Western universities are grounded in colonial structures and thus marginalize Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Brayboy et al., 2015; Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 2021; Green, 2020; Jewell & Mosby, 2022). Indigenous and racialized scholars and students are still underrepresented and marginalized in HE (Ladner & Tait, 2017; Mohamed & Beagan, 2019). While many Canadian universities include goals for Indigenization in vision statements and land acknowledgment is now a common practice, there are few changes in core academic functions, such as curriculum design, assessment, hiring, and promotion of faculty of ESGs (Daigle, 2019; A. Henry, 2015; White-Lewis, 2020). Because the oppressive structures of colonialism are deeply ingrained in HE, even when there is an institutional will it is often insufficient to transform the institutional culture (MacKenzie et al., 2023).

Donald’s (2009, 2022) work on ethical relationality, or kinship relationality when extended to relations between humans and more than humans (Donald, 2021), is useful in unpacking the lingering gap between performing EDI/D and a real transformation of HE institutions. Donald demonstrates how the “mythic symbol” of the fort “reinforces

the troubling colonial divides that continue to characterize Aboriginal-Canadian relations” (2009, p. 1). Similar to the fort, Canadian universities were established as relics of separation and marginalization, but unlike the historic feature of the fort they continue to reproduce this division. Donald sees colonialism as a “shared condition” between the colonized and the colonizers (Donald, 2009, p. 6), which means that it can only be repaired through a profound change in culture.

Donald’s observation extends Freire’s (1970/2000) argument that both the oppressed and the oppressors are locked in a system that dehumanizes them. For Freire the roots of oppression are grounded in material analysis. Yet scholars, such as Acosta (2014), weave critical pedagogy with Indigenous knowledge systems. Acosta and his colleagues draw on the Maya concept of “In Lak Ech,” which translates to “you are my other self” (p. 4), as a grounding principle for the transformation of relations.

Both ethical relationality and In Lak Ech highlight the importance of trust, reciprocity, and care in the restoration of relations. It is not about incorporating Indigenous knowledges into the frame of Western knowledge, but rather about creating HE systems in which diverse knowledge systems enrich each other, and all humans can flourish.

Literature Review

Studies highlight the connections between micro-level interactions and macro-level power discrepancies in HE (Mohamed & Beagan, 2019). Faculty from ESGs experience everyday racism and microaggressions, underrepresentation, impediments to tenure and advancement, and pressure to lead EDI/D-related initiatives (F. Henry & Tator, 2012; Ladner & Tait, 2017). They often carry heavy workloads, are asked to teach EDI/D courses, and support students and faculty (Castañeda & Hames-Garcia, 2014; Thobani, 2022b). Faculty from ESGs further experience isolation and marginalization in their institutions (Brayboy et al., 2015; Castañeda & Hames-Garcia, 2014; Spence, 2021). Constructed as the embodiment of diversity (F. Henry et al., 2017), they are tokenized, which impacts their well-being and “productivity” (Wijesingha & Ramos, 2017). Since EDI/D work is seen as “service” and outside the scope of academic responsibilities, faculty members who engage in this work are often left behind in hiring, promotion, and tenure (Thobani, 2022a). Furthermore, policies of tenure and promotion that are seen as “merit-based,” often devalue Indigenous and non-Western research forms (Rideau, 2021).

Those whose research areas related to EDI/D are at an even greater disadvantage, as they are seen as “political” and threatening to the institutions’ status quo (Brayboy et al., 2015; Castañeda & Hames-Garcia, 2014).

Even when institutions declare commitment to EDI/D it is with limited structural changes to effectively support this work (MacKenzie et al., 2023). Many institutions do not allocate sufficient and sustainable resources for EDI/D (Jewell & Mosby, 2022; Universities Canada, 2019). This can act as an institutional gaslighting tactic (Grant, 2021), creating an appearance of “doing” without leading to sustainable changes.

Context

In recent years there has been a strong push from the Canadian government to develop EDI/D action plans as well as specific anti-racism and Indigenization plans in HE (Campbell, 2021; Government of Canada, 2023). The Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences’ report titled *Igniting Change* (Congress Advisory Committee on Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization, 2021), acknowledges “the harm caused by, and the need to move away from, the injurious performativity of conventional EDI committees and technocratic checklists that result in superficial change” (p. 3). The report includes a “Charter on EDID,” which states the need for “a more resolute effort to achieve equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization in our disciplines, fields of inquiry, and artistic and cultural expressions” (Preamble, point 1). Similarly, the Canada Research Chairs program, Canada’s most prestigious research funding program, initiated EDI/D principles to guide the allocation of research chairs (Canada Research Chairs, 2019).

Multiple universities have signed the *Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian HE* (University of Toronto, 2022). Inspired by the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) and its 94 Calls to Action, decolonization and Indigenization discourses have become central in Canadian HE. Universities have since developed Indigenization plans, courses, training, and resources (University of Windsor, n.d.).

Overall, Canadian universities are becoming more active in promoting EDI/D (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). However, academic institutions are known for having gaps between their policies and practices. The *Igniting Change* report (Congress Advisory Committee on Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization, 2021) acknowledges

that “the slow progress of change has also generated widespread scepticism about EDI committees like our own, including the belief that such committees are where important social justice issues go to die” (p. 12). A recent report (Jewell & Mosby, 2022) demonstrates that out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s 94 Calls to Action, only 13 have been accomplished, and out of the 11 calls pertaining to education, none have been accomplished. The authors note that “At this rate, it will take 42 years, or until 2065, to complete all the Calls to Action” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015, p. 5). MacKenzie and colleagues (2023) point to a paradox: HE institutions present growing discursive commitment to EDI/D while “actively resist[ing] change to the everyday practices of the institution and related efforts to address inequity, combat racism, and enhance diversity” (p. 2).

EDI/D initiatives are also met with pushback. Critics argue that there is an increasing tendency to silence academic debate when it comes to discussing issues falling under the EDI/D umbrella (Ben-Porath, 2017; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). They further argue against “coddling students” through pedagogical measures such as issuing a “trigger warning” before discussing potentially sensitive topics, or deplatforming controversial speakers from giving talks on campuses (Chaudry & Kennedy, 2020; Lonas, 2023). Critics warn that such measures could impact open academic inquiry and lead to self-censorship (Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017).

Discussions about academic freedom are not as prevalent in Canada as in the United States (Axelrod, 2021) since Canada does not have the First Amendment and employers are bound by the Employment Equity Act (1995; last amended in 2021). Still, pushback against EDI/D on the grounds of academic freedom has grown stronger in Canadian universities (Spooner, 2022). For example, Kaufmann (2021) argues that “around six in 10 conservative Canadian academics in the social sciences and humanities say there is a hostile climate for their beliefs in their department” (para. 10). Some claim that as HE institutions adopt a more progressive agenda, they become less open to “viewpoint diversity” (Dummitt, 2019). Some provinces have taken steps to address concerns regarding encroachment on academic freedom. For example, the province of Quebec passed Bill 32 (2022), intended to support academic freedom, after issuing a survey in which 60% of academics surveyed indicated they engaged in some form of self-censorship. Similarly, the province of Ontario (Dea, 2018) demanded that all HE institutions in the province develop policies to ensure academic freedom, which critics argue is “based on the false

premise that freedom of expression is endangered at Ontario's universities" (Turk, 2020, p. 33). Such policies, as well as growing debates in the media (e.g., Bradley, 2023; Cooper, 2023) convey a message that academic freedom is at odds with EDI/D, which can impact how HE institutions approach it.

Methodology and Data Analysis

The case study, located in a teaching university in British Columbia, focused on the ways in which faculty, staff, and administrators who took part in EDI/D processes navigated tensions and relations at the institution. Case studies attempt to gain a wider understanding through "intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 28; see also Gorski & Pothini, 2018; Hamel, 1992; Yin, 2017). A case study approach is useful because many HE institutions in Canada are in a process of creating and implementing EDI/D policies and action plans; hence, a deeper look at one example might shed light on wider trends in Canadian HE.

The main source of data was grounded in semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Seidman, 2006) with faculty, staff, and administrators. In the case of controversial research topics, such as EDI/D in the current study, individual interviews are a preferred method to support participation and encourage critical reflection. The interview questions elicited observations regarding EDI/D processes at the university, with specific focus on the participants' experiences in leading and engaging in EDI/D-related initiatives. I interviewed 15 participants in different fields and positions. Participants were recruited through university newsletters, emails to committees involved in EDI/D work, and direct emails to those in EDI/D leadership roles.

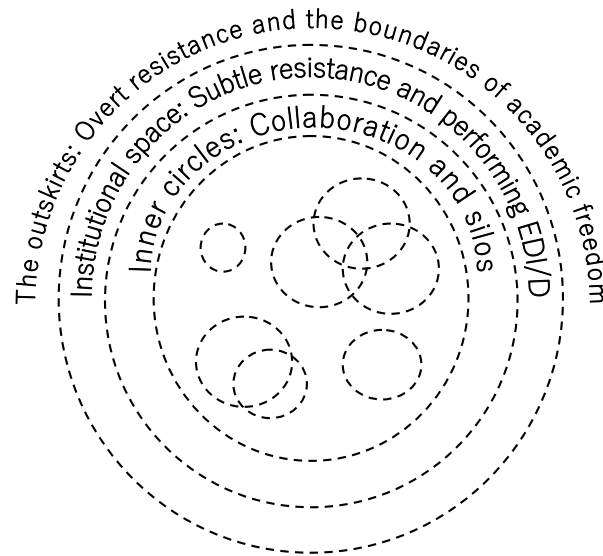
The recruitment process was not easy. Some people were concerned about being identified and declined participation, and two participants withdrew after reading the interview transcripts. This speaks to the opposing discourses about EDI/D. Participants were worried both about pushback from colleagues opposing EDI/D and being seen as critiquing EDI/D. To keep the identity of the participants confidential, I omitted some identifying markers when presenting the findings. This includes using pseudonyms and omitting self-identification in direct quotes. While self-identification and positioning are central to EDI/D, respecting the participants' confidentiality necessitated this choice. For example, since there are very few Indigenous faculty members, disclosing Indigeneity

status will easily identify them. This is also the case for non-binary participants. I still addressed positioning with relation to Whiteness, since it is a main construct in my analysis of power structures at the institution, by indicating if a participant is White or racialized. Seven participants self-identified as women, four as non-binary, and four as men. Five participants were Indigenous or belonged to racialized groups. All participants had either formal leadership roles in EDI/D or were involved in promoting EDI/D processes at the university (e.g., via committees, taskforces, and other forms of service).

Another source of data were policies related to EDI/D in HE in Canada, as well as specific university policies and other documents (e.g., newsletters, board meeting minutes). I also drew on qualitative and quantitative data collected by the Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion that conducted a “Current state Inclusivity Assessment” (CSIA) for the university.

Lastly, while not using comprehensive autoethnographic methodology (Anderson, 2006), I used my observations as a source of data. I am a White settler/new migrant whose work is focused on issues related to EDI/D in education. As a former faculty member at the university under study I took part in initiatives related to EDI/D, which made me aware of the complexity involved in this work.

After transcribing the interviews, I entered the data into NVivo software and looked for themes. Themes emerged both from the theoretical frame (e.g., performativity, EDI/D) and from the experiences shared by participants (e.g., pushback, separation, grouping). I utilized critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2013), as a method to question and challenge the construction of social reality in its dialectical relation to policy. CDA explores how language captures power relations (Bloor & Bloor, 2007); the data analysis therefore, aimed to unpack “*the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance*” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 249, emphasis in original). In this case I examined the relational arena of EDI/D as mirroring, reproducing, or disrupting the institution’s policies and priorities. In the second stage of the coding process, I identified key relational layers of EDI/D and grouped them by main categories. In the final stage these categories were organized as expanding relational circles, from the outskirts of the institution to the inner circles of those engaged in EDI/D work (Figure 1).

Figure 1*Relational Circles of EDI/D³*

Overt resistance toward EDI/D was not prevalent in the participants' narratives but was experienced in certain situations, particularly in online interactions. Most participants found such interactions emotionally and psychologically taxing, with little value in engaging with EDI/D resistance. They expressed how those who object to the institution's EDI/D initiatives will either adjust or be driven out. Alex shared,

For the folks that are going to keep pushing back, saying, "well, I have the academic right to spout this hate.... It's my right to do this. You can't change my mind."... If the culture is shifting, then, hopefully, those folks are going to see that they no longer belong in this organization.

Participants were also mindful of how they invested their energy. Amy shared:

[To] stand up against the institution and to assist the institution's transformation means that I have to fight, and I have been fighting, and it's going to require more energy...if someone is not willing to change, then I can't make them, and I don't want to.... My energy would be better used somewhere else.

3 The lines are blurred to indicate that these layers are fluid.

Some participants actively engaged in controversies, not because they believed their colleagues would change their minds, but because they could not keep silent. John shared, “when I put myself in the shoes of someone who, you know, might be feeling uncomfortable or might be feeling discriminated against or disrespected...I call out negative behaviour when I see it.”

Most participants from ESGs did not invest energy conversing with people positioned in clear ideological opposition to EDI/D (Casado Pérez, 2019). Strategically, this approach makes sense. The overreliance of HE institutions on members of ESGs to do the heavy lifting of EDI/D leads to high workloads and mental exhaustion, which takes away from their ability to focus on systemic changes (Bhopal, 2023; F. Henry & Tator, 2012; MacKenzie et al., 2023). Studies further argue that members of ESGs are at risk for career impediments if seen as “too political” (Mohamed & Beagan, 2019). Thus, it made sense for participants to focus on spaces more open to change. The participants who were confrontational often belonged to privileged groups (e.g., male, White) or had a more powerful position within the institution (e.g., administrators).

As they negotiated this layer, participants outlined their definition and boundaries of academic freedom. The participants did not think that EDI/D was in contradiction to academic freedom. They understood academic freedom as more limited than freedom of speech and bound by academic professionalism and ethics (Spooner, 2022; Turk, 2020). John explained his stance: “I believe very strongly in academic freedom and free speech, but I think there’s also a responsibility to wield it responsibly and in ways that don’t unnecessarily offend or hurt people.” Similarly, Mary shared:

Academic freedom so often masquerades as White supremacy...it’s tiring. It’s exhausting...[if] what you’re saying...is harming me as a person, as an individual of a particular social identity group, why, why are we now making room for conversation?

Along similar lines, Laura challenged the notion of “cancel culture,” a phenomenon initially referring to a withdrawal of support from public figures who made controversial comments, mostly on social media platforms (e.g., J. K. Rowling): “I think that it’s actually...a culture of consequence.... There should be consequences because for a long time there haven’t been, and people have been able to get away with saying and doing whatever they want.”

The above segments reflect an understanding that while academics can (and should) express diverse views, those views can be put under scrutiny, and criticized by colleagues and students. Accusations of “cancel culture” can be used strategically to dismiss critique and steer the conversation. Chemerinsky and Gillman (2017) argue that HE should “[protect] the expression of ideas but [impose] an obligation of responsible discourse and responsible conduct in formal educational and scholarly settings” (p. 77). The participants argue further that discourses should centre inclusion and be grounded in accountability for the well-being of members of ESGs in HE.

Some participants acknowledged that the growing divisiveness in HE makes it harder to engage with colleagues in nuanced conversations, in which people can relate to one another across difference. Mark shared, “In a debate it’s, ‘I’m gonna win, you’re gonna lose....’ So, we have had a lot of debate, but no conversation.” Kelly explained, “We’ve got sort of a hard right, and we’ve got a hard left, and the conversations polarizing along those lines instead of really being willing to be in the complex spaces.”

These observations reflect a sense that HE institutions have become more polarized and less conducive to challenging dialogue across difference. I have experienced this as well, for example when colleagues share questions about EDI/D-related topics in the hallways but will not raise them in department meetings. This echoes the views expressed in “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate” by a group of prominent authors in *Harper’s Magazine* (“A Letter on Justice,” 2020), which states: “The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away. We refuse any false choice between justice and freedom, which cannot exist without each other” (para. 3).

While exchange of ideas is crucial for education, communication cannot be separated from issues of equity and safety. Universities are not only spaces for idea exchange but also social institutions in which colonial and racial hierarchies are reproduced (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; F. Henry et al., 2017; Lawson, 2020). Donald’s (2022) understanding of ethical relationality as “learning from each other in balanced ways and sharing the wisdom that comes from living together in the spirit of good relations” (p. 6) helps distinguish learning from intellectual debate. It asks us to imagine, what might dialogue centred in reciprocity and respect look like?

Amy gave an example of how such conversations might be imagined: “when you’re speaking with your whole nervous system you’re being embodied, it doesn’t have

to be black and white, it can be so much more than that.” This observation hints at the disconnect of academic discourses from more holistic ways of engagement. It suggests that academic culture that embodies relations does not exclude difficult questions and disagreements, but grounds them in a commitment for living together.

Institutional Space: Subtle Resistance and Performing EDI/D

Like many HE institutions in Canada, the university under study is in the process of establishing an EDI/D Action Plan, Indigenization Strategy, and a Task Force on Anti-Racism. However, changing the culture of the institution demands a deeper process. As Tania shared: “Intention is one thing but putting support behind those words is another thing and that’s much harder to do.” Gaps were particularly prevalent around decolonization as it challenges core structures and practices of Western HE. As Donald (2022) states, “Unlearning colonialism is a complex process, which requires a change of culture and thus cannot be treated as an ‘intellectual problem’” (p. 3). Lisa suggested that part of the appeal of EDI (without the added D) is that “it’s the comfortable term a lot of people like to use because it’s not as political.”

Amy added,

If you bring in [a] decolonizing approach, it makes people upset because it seems as though you’re challenging the very function of the committee...I ended up taking on a teaching role about decolonization while trying to get the work done to continue to decolonize. So, it’s a double-edged sword. It’s a lot of emotional labour.

The quotes above demonstrate how EDI/D initiatives can be gaslighted in ways that do not penetrate the far-reaching Eurocentric structures of HE (MacKenzie et al., 2023). Studies further demonstrate that women of colour in HE are “constructed as the embodiment of ‘diversity’” and thus “treated as intrinsically amenable to, and responsible for, ‘diversity’ work” (F. Henry et al., 2017, p. 21). This leads to emotional labour by Indigenous and racialized faculty when they take on the role of teachers, all the while experiencing marginalization and isolation in the colonial and racial structures of HE institutions (Ahmed, 2012; F. Henry & Tator, 2009).

Participants described how they were being strategic in packaging EDI/D in ways that would lead stakeholders to buy in. Jane explained, “[It’s about] raising problems in a way that people can hear them without getting defensive.” Similarly, Alex shared,

There have been times where I’ve been a lot gentler...because I know that if I’m being blunt or a lot more specific...about what they’re doing wrong, I’m going to get that derailment.... I can’t be completely, just flat out, “This is what’s going on, like, oh, this is actually a racist comment.”

The participants’ responses reveal that although many Canadian HE institutions have respectful workplace policies in place, these policies can fail to protect. At times they can even be weaponized against those who point to systemic discrimination, who may be seen as uncooperative or problematic (Ahmed, 2017). Participants had to be strategic in how to critique those in positions of power within a White Eurocentric institution (Jiwani, 2006; Joyce, 2015; Payne & Suddler, 2014). Jane explained: “I get frustrated and impatient sometime[s] about the degree to which we have to negotiate White fragility and masculine fragility.... [But] I also don’t think that shaming or shutting down, you know, is a helpful, productive reaction.” Jane raises the notion of White fragility, “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 54). F. Henry and Kobayashi (2017) similarly argue that “White or mainstream professors, unaware of their small behaviors or comments, are likely to deny being racist” (p. 118).

In the context of Canadian HE, academics want to be perceived as supporting EDI/D because it is a prevalent terminology on grant applications, job advertisements, and conferences. But verbal support may not include challenging HE institutions as sites of colonialism and Whiteness. Kelly explained:

People are having these conversations or workshops...left, right and centre, about decolonization or Indigenization or anti-racism. Talking, talking, talking, but there seems to be a gap. A lot of people are not resistant to participating in the discourse but are very resistant to practical on-the-ground implementation.

Similarly, Jane shared: “I’m skeptical about people who are...too readily, you know, ‘rah rah rah’ about EDI...sometimes I wonder if people who believe that they’re supportive [of] EDI have really thought about what that means.” This points to the use of EDI/D as “virtue signaling” (Al Shaibah, 2020). Presenting oneself as an ally can act as a performance of solidarity while at the same time deflecting from an examination of power and hierarchies in HE (Reynolds, 2010). A change in discourse can be superficial, but a change in relations demands both reflection and action.

Another form of subtle resistance to EDI/D was enacted via its interpretation as something external to core academic structures. The *Igniting Change* report (Congress Advisory Committee on Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization, 2021) acknowledges that the legacy of colonialism “continue[s] to shape, all spheres of social, cultural, political, and economic life in Canada” (p. 49) including “Eurocentric knowledges, which are embedded in cultural production, and reproduced in education through Ministries of Education from K-12 to higher education” (p. 49). However, HE institutions are slow to change their culture and the processes of knowledge production (Universities Canada, 2019). This was evidenced in the sabotage of efforts to integrate EDI/D into curricula. Laura shared that when trying to integrate EDI/D guidelines into the curriculum review process she received “a lot of pushbacks [from the committee] about: what’s the [curricular] case for EDI.” EDI/D was also seen as detrimental to rigor and merit. Peggy explained: “People thought that [EDI] was, in fact, unfair to certain students or may be affecting rigor.” Such reactions reveal a pervasive view of Western knowledge as universal; in other words, detached from Eurocentric power structures. They also demonstrate how notions of merit and rigor, highly valued in the academic culture, are perceived as opposing EDI/D. This is a form of epistemic superiority that works to maintain the current power relations by setting the benchmark for academic excellence in Western traditions (Akena, 2012; White-Lewis, 2020).

Similar comments were expressed in discussions about hiring. Vivian shared: “people were pushing back against, ‘we have to hire this type of person,’ and they literally said, ‘someone like me [i.e., White] doesn’t have a chance of being hired.’” While studies demonstrate persistent gaps in hiring, particularly in senior academic positions (Universities Canada, 2019), misconceptions that EDI/D lenses in hiring obscure merit and are discriminatory toward White/male academics were prevalent. As F. Henry et al. (2017) argue, “discourses of liberalism, meritocracy, neutrality, and objectivity...mask the stubborn persistence of inequity and unacknowledged biases” (p. 8).

Overall, the engagement with EDI/D at the institutional level was often superficial. Superficial engagement differs from a dialogue in a Freirean sense, that is grounded in “an epistemological relationship” (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 379). In the context of HE it is a willingness to critique the academic culture and examine how universities construct knowledge (Battiste, 2000). Unlike liberal theories that see reasoning as a main tool in a pursuit of knowledge (Rosenblith & Bindewald, 2012), ethical relationality further proposes that this is not only an intellectual project, but rather an embodied one (Donald, 2022).

Inner Circles: Collaboration and Silos

The inner circles included academics who were actively engaged in EDI/D in teaching, service, or administration. The participants articulated the importance of collaboration and relations for both support and strategic planning. Amy shared, “When engaging in EDI...there’s an ability to work together and there’s a relationship that’s already built.” Lisa agreed: “It’s really important to have support...not to burn out because it’s an easy thing to do, especially when you get a lot of that resistance or, you know, possibly hostility...if there’s a difficult space, we warn each other.”

Since those who are engaged in transformative work often hit institutional “brick walls” (Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal, 2023), relations and collaborations were crucial for the participants’ well-being (Casado Pérez, 2019). Tammy acknowledged this, stating, “The amount of emotional labour involved in these changes is immense and often traumatic.” Lisa shared, “We get asked for a lot of things...I guess the most challenging part is getting asked to sort of play expert when you don’t feel like that’s your role.” It is well documented that EDI/D work is disproportionately done by racialized, Indigenous, and female scholars, who are “set up as the ‘natural’ spokeswomen for these issues” (Thobani, 2022b, p. 21). Despite the degree of emotional, intellectual, and practical labour involved in EDI/D work, since it is often constructed as “service” (hence, devalued in comparison to “real academic work”), it can negatively impact one’s academic advancement (Douglas, 2022; Wijesingha & Ramos, 2017).

White participants negotiated their positioning within EDI/D work while relating to racialized colleagues, as Tammy shared: “It’s uncomfortable because there’s a fear of getting things wrong, and a huge awareness of one’s own lack of knowledge, or like the fear of misspeaking.” Jane elaborated,

I hesitate to speak about race issues in a way that would seem to, “White-splain” the voices in the room that we should be listening to.... I’m combating my own feelings of White fragility...I’m doing a lot of paddling underneath the water to sort of try and stay in a place that I can still be contributing meaningfully and constructively to the process.

Positioning in EDI/D is important, keeping in mind that diversity policies disproportionately advance “privileged Others” (White women) over “Other Others” (e.g., Indigenous women and women of colour) in HE (Smith, 2010). Collaboration demanded acknowledging differences in access to power and privilege, and ongoing appraisal of meaningful allyship (Davis et al., 2022). For example, White male participants described taking a more confrontational position because they received less pushback than colleagues of colour.

Participants also raised concerns that EDI/D discourses did not expand to wider circles of participation. John shared, “It’s the same group of people at the same workshops and...we started to call ourselves ‘the coalition of the willing,’ there’s sort of ‘usual suspects’ you expect to be there and...it’s not the majority of people.” Kelly seconded: “There’s no real way or process to bring people in that aren’t already interested or engaged in the conversation.” This again speaks to the lack of university-wide integration of EDI/D and its containment to designated workshops and circles. It enforces the image of EDI/D as an add-on, that is disconnected from structural changes (MacKenzie et al., 2023).

The governance and structures of the university contributed to the superficial engagement with EDI/D, as Tammy explained: “meetings aren’t really designed for this right?... Sometimes what’s required is like a five-hour conversation, and we’ve got 15 minutes and then we must move to the next thing.” Institutional structures such as committees can prevent a shift in relations, because complex conversations demand time and patience. This cannot be squeezed into a 15-minute agenda item. When there are attempts to create alternative spaces (e.g., longer, more holistic meetings) that could centre building relations, they often receive pushback as “unproductive” and disrupting the academic calendar.

Participants further described a lack of coordination in EDI/D initiatives across the institution. Tania shared: “I would love to see a coordination between everyone. That groups are brought together on a regular basis to talk with one another.” Tammy added:

“There is danger of becoming fragmented when so many different groups are operating.” The lack of coordination can be understood as another “strategy of containment” HE institutions use to “divide and rule” (Thobani, 2022b, p. 41). From an institutional perspective, division is a way to limit the potential of a transformative agenda.

The lack of institutional coordination was mirrored by elements of self-segregation. Vivian shared how discussions could lead to separation rather than intersectional collaboration:

[There is] a disability rights advocate, and then there’s a gender advocate, and then there’s an Indigenous rights advocate, and they’re almost arguing with one another in terms of whose rights are being trampled on more.

Identity-based segregation can impede meaningful EDI/D by shifting focus from intersecting structures of oppression (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991). Unpacking intersecting identities is a complex process that demands time and nuance, both of which are often limited in HE structures (Reynolds, 2010, p. 13). Binary categories, such as settler/Indigenous or privilege/oppressed, are not sufficient to capture the complexity of the human experience and, unless unpacked carefully, can lead to divisiveness rather than relating. However, if people do not feel welcome or safe, they will be less inclined to be in a vulnerable position and less open to other perspectives.

Some participants shared that they chose their words carefully in insider circles, because they worried that they would be seen as not fully committed to EDI/D. Kelly felt pressured “to be seen as being on the right team doing the right things,” adding, “you really have to guard [yourself].... It’s almost as though you have to be perceived as agreeing with everything in a certain way or you are somebody that perpetuates colonization.” Vivian shared: “I’ve been in meetings where an individual talks about White privilege and White male fragility, and they do it with the intent of, not educating, but of putting certain people down and intimidating. Intimidating. That’s a good word.”

Critics demonstrate that White fragility and White privilege are real barriers to engagement with EDI/D (DiAngelo, 2011); hence, these are not merely discursive tools aimed at silencing opposing views. However, dialogue demands epistemic humility and generosity (Chinnery, 2016), meaning that all the participants engage with each other with open minds and good intentions. Deep conversations are nested in a culture in which one can ask hard questions and make mistakes. It entails a willingness to be uncomfor-

table and take risks to reach a new understanding and see the world in a more complex way. Returning to the example in the introduction, if done in a “spirit of good relations” (Donald, 2022, p. 6), a discussion about Canada Day can be an opportunity for reflecting on the past and imagining the future of Canada, rather than a divisive intellectual debate.

EDI/D involves heavy workloads, emotional labour, and encountering resistance and marginalization in HE institutions (Anthym & Tuitt, 2019). Institutional tactics of “divide and rule” and gaslighting can impede the development of solidarity (MacKenzie et al., 2023; Thobani, 2022b). Thus, it is not surprising that insider circles could be spaces in which people share frustrations and critique. Yet feeling intimidated and guarded obstruct the deep conversations across difference that are at the heart of education.

Discussion

For EDI/D to be transformative it has to change the culture of HE institutions. A change of culture means a change in relations. Donald (2021) argues that “the field of education continues to be dominated by cultural assumptions that block meaningful and deep engagement with Indigenous understandings of knowledge and knowing” (p. 60). Building on this understanding this study suggests that debates about academic freedom, performativity, and identity-based fragmentation act, in different yet intersecting ways, as institutional gaslighting tactics of “relationship denial” that block deep engagement with EDI/D.

The construction of EDI/D as opposing academic freedom serves to justify disengagement with critical discussions by positioning them as ideological. Much of the debate around academic freedom is fuelled by conservative academics who use academic freedom selectively against what they see as a “woke” agenda (Srinivasan, 2023). Yet, this should not take away from the importance of academic freedom as core to the mission of HE. This study proposes that if looking from a relational (rather than an ideological) perspective, the more inclusive a space is the more it can be open to deep conversations and dialogue.

Similarly, the construction of EDI/D as contradicting merit, and as external to the curricula, reinforces the ingrained superiority of Western knowledge systems and blocks meaningful engagement with diverse knowledge systems and knowers. The wide support of EDI/D on a performative level does not open space for (and at times stands against) institutional transformation. For example, the embracement of land acknowledgement

on a discursive level can act as an institutional gaslighting tactic, shifting the focus from issues of sovereignty and land rights (Daigle, 2019).

Lastly, the institutional containment of EDI/D leads to silos that promote identity-based fragmentation. This in turn can lead to the creation of spaces that reproduce power relations only with different players. Understanding EDI/D as a move toward relationship building means that it is not about creating new hierarchies, but rather about restoring the humanity of all (Freire, 1977/2000, p. 44). This is an ongoing project because no human is flawless; yet recognizing the full range of humanity within each of us is an important step toward deeper relations and deeper self-reflexivity.

In an atmosphere of growing societal divisiveness, EDI/D must be grounded in reciprocity while acknowledging differences and power hierarchies. If not centred on relation building, EDI/D is at risk of remaining the newest educational buzzword, without offering real structural changes.

Concluding Thoughts

As HE institutions line up “to pronounce [their] commitment to inclusion and diversity, with each institution solemnly promising to do better” (Thobani, 2022b, p. 41), universities find new ways to contain and manage EDI/D. It is not surprising that decolonizing discourses are particularly threatening for HE, as they require moving beyond the add-ons framework and unsettling the foundations of Western institutions. The notion of ethical relationality highlights the need to intentionally interact with each other “in ways that bring benefits to all people who live on the land together” (Donald, 2022, p. 6). Relationship building requires time and deep engagement. It is a messy and non-linear process that goes beyond specific policies and cannot be reduced to changes in terminology. Existing governance structures such as committees and administrative roles often involve constraints and “to do lists” that restrict and derail meaningful engagement with EDI/D. Institutions should consider how governance and conduct might look were they grounded in relationship building. As bell hooks (McLeod, 1998) asks, “how do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?” (para. 60).

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