Metaphors as a Tool for Transformation in Social-Change Dialogues

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Introduction

What does it mean to work for changes that will fundamentally shift how human societies organize themselves so that more people will have access to the conditions that support human flourishing? How do you practice social change in an era of polarization? How do you influence positive social change when powerholders see everything from calls for fundamental human rights to climate change realities as conspiracies?

This paper retrospectively explores five metaphors for social change as a sensemaking and transformative framing practice in complex organizational and social-change scenarios. I follow a brief contextual overview with a description of how my own Afrocentrism worldview has been central to my preference for working within a Dialogic Organization Development mindset/theory of change. I then discuss the specific use of narrative forms as part of my dialogic practice to support groups thinking about social change through five metaphors that have emerged from my work and experiences. I close with an offering of lessons learnt and a call to action for the application of these and other narrative forms to social change in this era.

Context

We are living in an era of dramatic social change which is characterized by fast and constant global events that are rupturing existing social structures and norms. This break in the past constitutes a threat to cultural identities, putting pressure on societies to regain equilibrium (de la Sablonnière, 2017). Concerns about downward mobility and the loss of social, economic or political power have led to populist movements across Europe and in the United States, while authoritarianism is rising around the world (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025; Ferwerda, 2024).

Simultaneously, social change leaders point to the reality of changing global demographics and the rise of inequities which are among the world's greatest threats, and continue to call for more justice and equality (UN, 2025). In this uneasy space which I have previously labelled *Grey Zone Change* - the space between the end of an old order and an emerging one - there is a silver lining (Gilpin-Jackson, 2020a). The work of cycling through thesis-antithesis-synthesis that leads to knowledge-making and new social norms is well underway. The system is doing the work it

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must do to arrive at a new equilibrium, and transformation is possible. In that process however, proponents of social change have themselves called for better mental models and organizing principles that mitigate the challenges of social change work in the current context of complexity and polarization.

For example, adrienne maree brown articulated the need for underlying principles to support emergent strategy and transformational change and justice. Brown has also highlighted the harmful impacts of knee-jerk cancel culture (brown, 2017, 2020). Maurice Mitchell articulated the pervasive and contradictory challenges faced within social movements, calling for an essential reset in organizing (Mitchell, 2022). Lily Zheng pointed out that diversity, equity and inclusion work risks falling prey to the "industrial complex mentality" that could breed mistrust rather than deliver the equity results we so desperately need, predicting a lot of the rollbacks currently underway (Zheng, 2022). These and others have called for system-wide, ecological, emergent and human-centered approaches to achieve transformational change. These perspectives on transformation, as I have articulated elsewhere, have long existed in non-formal and indigenous knowledge systems and are also well established within the organization development and systems change academic scholarship (Gilpin-Jackson & Blesoff, 2024).

In this context, I have found myself working with groups to bridge this daunting gap between theory and practice, and support social changemakers to move beyond singular interventions and isolated problem-solving to thinking about their theory of change, encouraging leaders and groups to address these questions:

- What is your theory of change/how do you believe social change happens?
- What are your strategies for addressing the social-change challenge you are working on?
- What images/metaphors align with your theory of change and/or strategies that you can draw inspiration from along the way when organizing gets tough?

Methodology: Afrocentrism, Dialogic Organization Development and Narrative Inquiry

An Afrocentric worldview claims the right to think and make sense of the world by foregrounding one's own African/Black knowledge systems. In a world system that has been systematically designed to center and legitimize Western European/North American worldviews over all others, this is easier said than done. Additionally, the result of colonization on Africa, Africans and peoples of African descent globally has been the institutionalization of Western knowledge systems—resulting in ongoing coloniality. Education, social, political, economic and cultural systems for Black/African peoples have generally been modelled on colonial systems and structures deemed synonymous with measures of Western development. Thus, Blackness or Africanness in itself, does not guarantee knowledge or understanding of what it may mean to engage the world from an Afrocentric center as a result of the colonization of the mind and imagination of African and Black peoples. Moreover, the Eurocentric world order which has claimed to center democracy has, ironically, met attempts at democratizing knowledge systems with resistance and backlash. For example, calls for authentic engagement towards epistemic freedom for Black, Indigenous and racialized global majorities have been met with 'anti-woke' culture war ideologies. Importantly, these calls for epistemic and cognitive justice do not mean the counter-erasure of Eurocentric thought or the romanticizing of Indigenous knowledge systems. They advocate, rather, for the democratization of knowledge systems such that each are viewed within their own contexts for their merits and demerits, making diverse ecologies of knowledge available to better serve all humanity. For example, we are witnessing in real time, the criticality of learning from Indigenous knowledge systems to address our climate change crises (Hoppers, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Nsamenang, 2003; wa Thiongo, 2012, 2019).

I am a racially classified Black woman of African heritage, who grew up socialized and imbued with both African and Western sensitivities and ways of knowing in post-colonial Sierra Leone, West Africa. However, I often tell the story of how I came to centering Afrocentrism in my scholarship and practice as a way of grounding how necessary it is for Black, Indigenous and racialized peoples to engage the world from the site of their own knowing and truths. Though I had been cycling at the edge of embracing Afrocentrism, the transformative moment for me came at a conference. I had finished and self-published a short story collection at the request of the organizers, in order to facilitate a discussion at an Afrocentrism conference about Black/African experiences in the diaspora. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who was one of the few African scholars whose work I had been aware of over the course of my predominantly Western education, was one of the conference keynoters. Needless to say, it was an honour to engage directly with him and I also facilitated the discussion following his talk.

As I listened to wa Thiong'o speak about what it means to secure the base of our own knowing, an interaction I had had with my editor in the lead up to the conference while finalizing the short story collection flashed before me. During the editorial process, we had laughed about her notes on the very first line of my manuscript, where I had described a brown-skinned protagonist as 'white-knuckled'. She pointed out in her line edits with a smiley face that that was not possible. I remember being mildly embarrassed at not having caught the error. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o spoke however about the power of language in framing thought, I recognized that my error was much more than an editorial oversight. I did not know how to describe a Black person in tension because of the education and language fluency I had access to. It made me realize how much internal decolonizing and deprogramming I have yet to do, likely in ways I do not even fully understand. I realized in that moment and carry now, the knowledge that having self-definition and a strong identity core, separate from the

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typecast social roles I have inherited, matters deeply. For there I was, modelling my protagonists according to the stories in my head of people who were generally white-knuckled in times of tension.

That moment pulled together the threads of my previous scholarship based on narrative inquiry and storytelling and wove them into the frameworks I have offered that propose transformative development frameworks for Black/African peoples. Those development frameworks include the turn to identity, belonging and agency from a place of self-definition. Like Senator Murray Sinclair and so many Canadian Indigenous thinkers and scholars who have theorized about the dilemma of western acceptability based on two-eyed seeing, I recognize the quandary of my educational molding. Though critical to who I am now and my access to the world as it is, my education in some ways required that I diminish my own identity, unless I intentionally reclaim it (Gilpin-Jackson, 2020b, 2024; Sinclair et al, 2024).

I have also realized since then, that it is the duality of my knowing, conscious and suppressed, that first and foremost drew me to my bent for understanding systems change through social experience. Dialogic Organization Development (OD), which says that human reality is socially constructed and can only be changed through collective meaning-making of that social system, is consistent with the African sociogenic worldview (Bushe and Marshak, 2015; Nsamenang, 2003).

In Dialogic OD, when complex systems are disrupted, as our world of polycrises now is, transformational change is facilitated by conditions that allow for generativity. Generativity includes the exploring and unfolding of stories, images and language that might allow for the emergence of alternative narratives leading to a new order (Bushe and Marshak, 2015). This requires making space for transformative learning that calls on people to engage their whole selves, including their affective, imaginal, conceptual and practical psyches (Heron, 1991). I have come to understand, for example, that what I have conceptually understood as emergence in Dialogic OD, I have always experienced in African cultural contexts through affective and imaginal modes of engagement. This constant sensemaking of past and current realities and the calling of futures into being through the whole self is inherent to Afrocentric worldviews. In Afrocentric ways of knowing, for example, human experience is grounded in a spiritual selfhood, a social selfhood and an ancestral selfhood (Nsamenang, 2003).

Narrative inquiry and storytelling in oral and written forms can be used for retrospective meaning-making and sense-making of experience. It can also be used for emergent theory-building and modelling. In Afrocentric ways of knowing, story, metaphor, imagery, song, parables and folklores are commonplace, and used to describe, for example, all stages of the selfhood, existential and transcendent. These narrative forms impart understanding and translate cultural norms through oral traditions, as well as disrupt and contest indigenous and exogenous issues of identity, agency and social change in Africa and her diaspora (Ansu-Kyeremeh, 2005; Chase, 2005; Chandrashekharappa, 2024; Irele, 2001; Karp and Masolo, 2000; Solinga et al, 2008).

Metaphors for Social Change

As a leader and/or facilitator, I have regularly found myself in the midst of complex dialogues on social change in the past few years. In my ongoing reflective sensemaking of these often difficult and complex situations with high-stakes and multiple conflicting factors, I began to recognize a common inflection point in which there was a noticeable shift from rapidly escalating tensions, towards generativity and shared meaning-making. That point was when a metaphor emerged to capture the complexity of the social change situation the group was wrestling with. Below is a description of each of these scenarios and how making a metaphor helped move the group forward.

Quilting

> *"Find your Square. None of us can be the whole Quilt. None of us can solve all the problems there are to solve in the current world order. Each of us must focus on our square and work with the connected squares to make progress. Find your Square!".*

I said this in a fireside chat as I felt a tingling sense of resonance with historical memory. I had not thought of the metaphor at all in my preparation for the panel. It emerged uniquely from the shared experiences of the panelists and the questions from the audience. The sense of overwhelm, trauma and fatigue from the impact of issues of concern was palpable, and the quilting metaphor was my response. In that moment, I was reminded that quilting in Black history in the North Americas was much more than artistry or a trade for Black women. It was about storytelling and survival, encoding hidden messages on the way to emancipation from enslavement, enroute to and through the Underground Railway (Chandler, 2025; Shadd, Smardz and Cooper, 2022). The conversation that followed shifted from trauma to possibilities for quilting our global futures. Panelists and participants alike remarked that the quilting moment was the moment their hope was restored.

Being a Hummingbird

In a symposium on heath equity, my co-presenter and I were asked to tell a story from our lives that led us to a commitment to equity and social change. After our presentations, a participant shared that our storytelling had reminded her of a parable told by Professor Wangarĩ Maathai, Kenyan environmental and political activist, Founder of the Green Belt Movement, and the first African woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize, to illustrate her commitment to her work. It was a parable of a hummingbird in a devastating forest fire. As the fire raged, the animals gathered, distraught and helpless, except for the hummingbird who began to go back and forth to the stream, taking a drop of water at a time, to put out

the fire while even the elephant did nothing. The other animals tried to discourage the hummingbird, saying its efforts would not be enough, but the hummingbird said: "I am doing the best I can". The participant explained that Maathai had said that this was her focus and called everyone to do the same (Wangari Maathai Foundation, 2020).

> *"I will be a hummingbird: I will do the best I can."*

The ensuing dialogue focused on agency and action for change, rather than on a sense of 'stuckness', given the magnitude of change needed to achieve health equity in our lifetimes.

An Infinity Relay/Loop

I was in a group discussing the never-ending deluge of issues that seem constantly to get in the way of social justice. Participants described the exhaustion of working on issues only to feel the despair of every pushback. Their fatigue was palpable.

> *"Social change is not a sprint," I said: "It's a marathon relay. We are here to run our section and hand the baton over to the next person when our leg is done or we get tired. The next person runs their leg and so on. That is how we run this race."*
>
> *"No, it is an infinity loop," another participant said. "The journey never ends."*

This imagery and sensemaking seemed to provide some relief in the room. The point had been made. We are never 'done'. Our task is to manage our pace and stamina, heal our trauma and find our joy so that we can run our section and pass on the baton.

Seed-Planting

> *"In working for social change, you need to think of your work as seed-planting. Sometimes the conditions are right and the seedlings sprout quickly. Other times, there will be more work to do. You will plant the seed, others will water it and maybe sometime in the future everything will come together and the seed will grow."*

This is the metaphor I have offered most often, as a reminder to groups that social change requires an ecology of conditions to succeed. Seeds need good soil, water, light, oxygen and nutrients. Once seedlings sprout, they must be nurtured and the planters must watch for weeds to be pulled so the seedlings are not choked. This metaphor has helped me to make the point with groups that just because you never see the seed grow does not mean your efforts are wasted. Seed-plant anyway, knowing some planting may not bear fruit for generations. This is why many Indigenous traditions think generationally.

The Baobab Tree

After a particularly taxing workweek, I found myself driving and reflecting on the burdens of leadership in these times. There was a lot to do, and a lot I was being asked to be for different stakeholders. I knew it was unlikely I would please everyone.

> *"Be like the Baobab tree."*

My mother's voice in my head brought a smile. She had just written a memoir, which she titled: *Shade of the Baobab Tree*. In it, my sister wrote this in the Foreword:

> *"Due to its versatility and because it can survive harsh conditions, live for more than a thousand years, store water and offer food and medicine, the baobab tree is known as the 'The Tree of Life' and has a long history of folklore and symbolism in traditional cultures. Consequently, it is not only associated with the ability to adapt to harsh conditions, but also with resourcefulness, strength, resilience, protection and the ability to overcome." (Kanu, 2023, p xi)*

There has to be a way to thrive in the storms. For leaders of social change and changemakers, this means being useful, resilient and finding ways to overcome in all seasons.

Discussion

Table 1 summarizes these metaphors for social change, showing the context in which each applies. In sum, the core lessons from the emergence of these metaphors of social change for scholars and practitioners to consider going forward are:

1. The democratization of worldviews including Afrocentrism, Indigenous Knowledge Systems and other perspectives are necessary to understand and address the complex challenges of our times.
2. Metaphors offer mental models for understanding the complexity of social change.

	Social Change is…				
Metaphor	Quilting	Being a Hummingbird	An Infinity Relay/Loop	Seed-Planting	The Baobab Tree
Systems- change Impact:	Community connection	Individual Agency	Teamwork	Systems ecology	Leadership
Best used in the Context of:	Strategy and coalition-building	Countering despair/ restoring hope	Responding to backlash/fatigue/ burnout	Long-range thinking/ generational change	Developing leaders/ changemakers

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3. Metaphors of social change create conditions for generativity, making possible a shift from the complex dialectics imbued in those conversations to narratives of possibility.
4. Metaphors enable the whole-person engagement and learning that is required to facilitate social-change conversations.
5. Metaphors unlock the transformational change possibilities for social change.

Metaphors are limitless and can transcend cultures. This paper simply provides a starter pack to inspire social changemakers to take lessons from Afrocentric thought, start from their own centers and trust in the power of the metaphors, aphorisms and other narrative forms that emerge in tough contexts. As the case vignettes illustrate, metaphors represent a legitimate form of knowing that can spark generativity and transformation in social-change dialogues. This paper is an invitation to explore these metaphors within the contexts suggested. It is also a call to action to apply the lessons offered to assess your own work:

1. What worldviwews do you center and what are the advantages and disadvantages?
2. What metaphors might apply to the social change or complex organizational work you are currently undertaking?
3. What breakthrough meaning-making do metaphors offer to your situation?
4. What other metaphors and narrative forms could you seek out from the communities connected to, and impacted by, your work?
5. What transformative possibilities does this metaphorical and expanded narrative thinking unlock?

BIOGRAPHY

Yabome Gilpin-Jackson, PhD is an Human Development scholar-practitioner who is Principal at SLD Consulting, leader within the British Columbia Public Sector in Canada and is currently the first Vice-President, People, Equity and Inclusion and Associate Faculty member at Simon Fraser University. She was the first Organization Development Network (ODN) Emerging Practitioner recipient, an award named in her honour. She has written over 30 peer-reviewed publications and is a prolific conference presenter and sought-after speaker in leadership, organization development and social change. Her article on practising in the grey area between diagnostic and dialogic OD is featured in *OD Review Essentials*. Among other publications, she was contributor to the inaugural special issue journal and textbook on Dialogic OD and a past contributor here to Practising Social Change. She has also published and contributed to books including, *Transformation After Trauma, The Power of Resonance*, co-editor for the 2022 Palgrave *Handbook of Learning for Transformation*, lead editor for the *We Will Lead Africa* book series. She also dabbles with creative writing and has self-published short story collections about global African experiences. She is past Chair of the ODN and a member of NTL Institute of Applied Behavioral Science.

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