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Localize, Prioritize, Decolonize: A Guide for Consciously Supporting POC-led Organizations

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Put simply, Black people are not a problem...the problem is the system of white supremacy and the fact that Black people are experiencing the ravages of such a brutal and inhumane system.

Dayvon Love, “When Baltimore Awakes: An Analysis of the Human and Social Service Sector in Baltimore City,” 26

Introduction

When we consider creating access—to resources, to power, to healing—through grant writing, it’s imperative that we consider who we are creating access for, and how. White people doing social and racial justice advocacy (as we the authors are)—specifically with grant writing and non-profit organizations (NPOs)—not only can center POC-led, community-oriented organizations, but need to do so consciously and intentionally. In this article, we will offer a framework for conscientiously forging new partnerships, developing cultural competence (in ourselves and our students), navigating relationships, and emphasizing community outcomes, all with equitable resource access in mind. We will include practical advice, tools, and illustrations from the Grant writing in Valued Environments (G.I.V.E.) program at Towson University (TU),

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which provides grant writing and infrastructural support to primarily Black-led, local non-profits through internships, undergraduate, and graduate classes, with a track record of over \$700,000 in grants awarded. As described in a report from 2020 written by our colleagues on Black-led organizations in Baltimore, many are struggling to sustain themselves and urgently need funding, resources, and support (Sillah, Worgs, & Thomas 15).

In this article, we discuss our journey of localizing partnerships and projects to further address needs within the communities our institutions occupy or neighbor. Preventing unintentional harm requires “prioritizing the goals, viewpoints, and authority of these organizations and communities at all times—they lead us on the journey; leveraging resources for distributive justice within an acknowledgment of our role in historical inequity; and centering and uplifting local community knowledge and historically marginalized voices” (*Anyanwu*). Ultimately, we strive to decolonize philanthropy (Lawson, Mooney, & Young) which includes paying heed to Audre Lorde’s insistence that we stop ignoring, copying, and destroying in the face of difference and instead create new “patterns for relating across human difference as equals” (Lorde 115).

G.I.V.E.’s context in the Baltimore-metro area informs our approach, and our community partnerships steer us. Baltimore is a hypersegregated city with a long and sordid history of Jim Crow, hyperpolicing, redlining, serial-forced displacement, and continued systemic oppression of its majority Black population. G.I.V.E., a university supported engagement project at Towson University, seeks to use grant writing and infrastructure support for community NPOs as a way to “return stolen resources” (Marcus and Munoz 2018), acknowledge legacies of injustice in our local and home communities, place students of color in leadership roles when possible, and prioritize work with under-resourced organizations led by People of Color. While TU’s proportion of students of color has just surpassed 50%, TU had been a PWI (predominantly white institution) since *Brown v. Board of Education* and a “white only” institution before that, and recruitment from Baltimore City still lags. Faculty diversity is also taking longer to measure up to student diversity. We acknowledge our own role in this dynamic, as both of us who lead G.I.V.E. are white women (only one of us is a Baltimore native), so we strive to partner with faculty of color in Liberal Arts doing similar work and to support their vision and values.

The G.I.V.E. program researches, writes, submits, and tracks grants for small, community NPOs which fulfills needs for both parties: students gain professional skills in grant writing and increase their cultural competence, while small organizations receive assistance with infrastructure and capacity building in ways usually only granted

to larger, better-funded NPOs. For G.I.V.E, TU's historical connections to West Baltimore have informed our emphasis on organizations there, as has our desire to work with organizations that most need our support.

As we teach and support grant writing, how do we prevent advancing more of the status quo, or what some call the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC) (Kivel; Smith; Villanueva; Love)? In the introduction to *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, Andrea Smith explains that the NPIC “controls and manages dissent by incorporating it into the state apparatus, functioning as a shadow state constituted by a network of institutions that do much of what government agencies are supposed to do with tax money” (8-9). Grant funding as part of the NPIC, like all social systems, tends to reinscribe existing inequities which is known as a form of “Philanthropic Redlining” (“The Case for Funding Black-led Social Change”); power remains with organizations functioning as an extension of the state. It's much easier for those who already have money to gain more of it, and the system's processes thwart change.

In response to this system, we are committed to creating spaces that resist the harmful ideologies (racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, sexism, classism, ableism) that perpetuate inequitable practices impacting us and our communities (Anyanwu, personal interview). In laying out our framework for decolonizing grant writing and community engagement, we will first exemplify Audre Lorde's three modes of dealing with difference (ignore, copy, destroy) within a grant writing and community engagement context before then examining how to localize, prioritize, and decolonize our efforts within that same context.

The Problem of Whiteness

One seemingly intractable problem of living and working as a white person in Black city has been how to crack the code of whiteness. Can real repairs happen? When? In 1903 in *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Dubois examines the question “How does it feel to be a problem” with regard to “Black Folks” (1)? In what's below, we reiterate this question within a reversal. Using extensive personal and professional experience, we inquire into the impacts and consequences of whiteness in asking: as white people, “how does it feel to be a problem?” Many scholars and writers of color have constructed whiteness as a problem (Kendi, Dyson, Love, Lorde and more), so us doing this is not new. Yet as white academics, writers, and fundraising professionals, it is crucial that we understand and consistently apply principles and practices that ameliorate the harm whiteness has done and continues to do in communities of color

and within a broader white supremacist system. In *The Black Butterfly: The Harmful Politics of Race and Space in America*, Lawrence Brown defines white supremacy as

An ideological, philosophical, and theological perspective that spawns institutions, policies, practices, systems, and budgets that incur structural advantages for White people and neighborhoods and create structured disadvantages for Black, Brown, and Native people and neighborhoods. Structural advantages include material wealth, access to capital, high-quality public goods, respectful policing, and landownership, while structured disadvantages include wealth extraction, lack of access to capital, poor quality public goods, hyperpolicing, and forced displacements or uprootings. (28)

White supremacy is deep-rooted and will not abate on its own. Ijeoma Oluo, in her book *So You Want to Talk About Race*, shares that being a Person of Color is like being in an abusive relationship (34). In his chapter on “The Five Stages of White Grief,” Eric Michael Dyson says that People of Color often don’t tell white people the truth due to the fact that we can’t handle it. Thus, we wish to talk truthfully about the problem of whiteness and offer ways to employ strategies to reduce and repair harm actively.

When we listen to the hard truths that Love, Oluo, Dyson, and our community partners tell us, anti-racist work becomes all the more urgent, even moreso for those of us claiming to “do good” or “create social change.” Doing anti-racist work, however, requires persistence in rejecting cultural standards (Kendi 176) and in committing to arduous and often painful lifelong learning and action; essentially, we must enact a "racial reorientation of our consciousness" (Kendi 47). In the first half of our essay, we organize a racial reorientation for white people--academics, writers, and fundraising professionals--around Audre Lorde's three modes of our programmed responses to difference: that is, the tendency to ignore it, copy it, or destroy it. As Lorde tells us, “We have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals” (115). In order to contend with the problem of whiteness, we will exemplify Lorde’s three modes within a grant writing and community engagement context before then examining how to localize, prioritize, and decolonize whiteness within that same context.

Whiteness Ignores

Examples abound that demonstrate how whiteness ignores, fails to acknowledge, overlooks, rejects, and/or discounts Black people and Black communities' ideas, realities, histories, customs, needs, strengths, and accomplishments. In the context of grant writing for NPOs, we can think about how whiteness tends toward overlooking Black history and culture, which is a form of discounting Black culture--often this may occur without us realizing what we are doing. Because of this, we can't sit and wait to learn what we don't know; we have to seek Black history and culture out but be mindful of how we do that. Those of us working with organizations that work for, with, and/or are led by People of Color (as well as organizations led by anyone, really) must spend time learning local and national Black histories and Afrocentric ideas and incorporating them into our consciousness in a way that is mindful of ideological colonialism. In this context, we don't ever say "we don't know what we don't know"; rather, we say "we need to learn" and "our way of doing is likely not the best way and definitely not the only way" (Walker). We have come to realize that it's not only "our way" of doing that can undermine power in the communities and in the people we aim to actually empower, but sometimes, it is our mere presence that is a problem.

A case in point has been the onboarding to G.I.V.E. of a new organization: a historically Black neighborhood association that has existed in our backyard (just adjacent to the University) for generations without us ever having known about the organization or the community's important history. The history goes as follows: once those who had been enslaved on Hampton Plantation in Towson, MD were free, these ancestors bought houses and started a community in nearby East Towson in 1853. Over time as Towson University moved to the area and development grew, the boundaries of the Historic East Towson neighborhood slowly shrunk, limited now to just a few square blocks that descendants are fighting to defend against gentrification. We were dismayed that none of us had any idea that the community existed--though we had heard of the Plantation plenty. We were cognizant that whiteness engendered at least part of our failure to know the history of this Free Black community. Since, we've acknowledged that the line between not knowing and disregarding or discounting is thin, thus again we are compelled to educate ourselves and to accept that we shouldn't be so surprised to learn we had taken part in this erasure. This case in point concerning Historic East Towson will come into play later in this article as well when we discuss localizing our work.

We can ask ourselves: have we sufficiently learned about communities of color nearby us? Have we made attempts to experience those cultures and know people... have we spent time, energy, and money towards those intentions? Other ways that

Black history and culture can be ignored and discounted include not being aware of the fact that Black communities typically can know a lot more than us about many, many things and can know differently than us, and do not exalt all the same norms and standards. A few examples we have learned in relation with community partners include: it's a mistake to assume that Juneteenth is a new phenomenon; if you are the only white person in a space filled with others, don't assume anyone else is thinking about it as much as you may be; pay attention to how your practice of formalities and kinship may be odd and offensive; be aware that your hyper-productivity may not be esteemed; understand that being should sometimes trump doing and getting done (Walker). Read authors and scholars of color and cite them in your work while giving those authors full credit and attribution for the ideas.

In addition to our gaps in knowledge and our lack of being in and with communities, we see similar modes of "ignoring" Blackness emerge out of those who fund NPOs; from them, we witness a lack of interrelationship with Black neighborhoods and Black-led organizations. Time and time again, we see white-led funders maintain their distance and thus fail to acknowledge strengths and assets within the community itself. It can happen that funders prioritize their own publicity of the relationship with Black-led organizations, or just write a check and do nothing more, or prioritize the collection of data over real-time, face-to-face relationship building. To address this, we make it a priority to invite funders (including university personnel) to the spaces and to the neighborhoods that our organizations and we work in. We invite them to spend time there.

In addition to funders, we also find ourselves in spaces and communities that are less known to us. We work hard to acknowledge the complexities that might otherwise be ignored. In terms of funders and other folks who visit West Baltimore, often for the first time, they may assume that the trash in the street and in the neighborhood indicates that residents don't care about their blocks. The truth is that folks in those zip codes care a lot but are lucky if trash is picked up regularly. The lack of trash collection—augmented by the lack of public trash cans on street corners that are plentiful in the “White L” neighborhoods but not in Baltimore’s “Black Butterfly”—is a practice of white supremacist culture that is wrongly attributed to people’s individual morals (Brown)--. We need to consistently relocate the pathology as part of white supremacist culture and not of communities and people.

That is, we learn to recognize the daily and "ongoing historical trauma," that communities experience and that forgetting this fact can be its own kind of deflection (Brown). We acknowledge that things are often the way they are because, as Lawrence Brown contends, of ongoing white supremacist “policies, practices, systems and

budgets”that include: hyperpolicing and hypersegregation, “slum clearance, urban renewal [gentrification], highway construction, post-industrialization, planned shrinkage, mass incarceration, stripping Black neighborhoods of public goods...mass closure of public schools and recreation, centers, underfunding of public health,” and more (55). Another example involves: asking someone from West Baltimore, “Where did you grow up” can be offensive when that question is contextualized within the “forced displacements and uprootings” that Brown includes in his definition of white supremacy (Walker). Folks may not have grown up in any one specific place. Asking someone in West Baltimore if they know anyone who has been killed by gun violence warrants the response: “you’re joking, right?”

Being in face-to-face community with folks being in relation and acknowledging how white supremacist policies, practices, systems, and budgets continue to do daily harm is only part of the repair. We also know that white bodies are not always wanted in spaces (Stuckey). We have learned how to decipher those cues, and to fade into the background or even leave entirely if the situation reads that our whiteness is an unhelpful or harmful obstruction or hindrance. If we weren’t “in relation” (Walker) with our organizations, we’d likely never be able to interpret situations accurately, which may cause more harm, which is why we prioritize long term, bonafide relationships. In the task of bringing attention to the many ways we overlook or discount Black people and Black communities’ ideas, realities, histories, customs, and needs, we are attempting to do less harm in our work in the NPO sector. And there is still so much to learn.

Whiteness Copies

As Lorde tells us, if whiteness can’t ignore or discount, whiteness then copies that which it perceives to be dominant. On a broader cultural level, we can see this trend for whiteness to copy Blackness in language, music, dance, fashion, and more. Related to the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC), the term "incorporated resistance" comes into play (Clarke; Love 52). “Incorporated resistance” is explained by Love as the practice of white-controlled institutions incorporating progressive/radical discourses while leaving white supremacist colonial power intact (52). Since we work for a white controlled institution (Towson University), we acknowledge that our progressive/radical discourses do not necessarily disrupt the white supremacist system we function, even thrive, in. Within the G.I.V.E. Project at Towson University, the composition of some of our most outstanding and enduring rhetoric came out of a

collective effort led by a woman of color who was an underpaid student employee; yet, the institution now “owns” that handicraft.

Adopting and appropriating the ideas and language of others within the university milieu is one matter, while appropriating from communities outside the institution is another. Yet both situations call for an analysis that considers Love’s notion of controlling “thought leadership” (61). When leadership copies that which is thought to be superior—without acknowledgement—this can often manifest as vague commitments (Sillah, Worgs, & Thomas). Love, in "When Baltimore Awakes," talks about the need for organizations and communities to take back control of “thought leadership” (61) and have "autonomous intellectual innovation" (2). In the setting of a Black-led NPO organization, G.I.V.E. prioritizes these two principles: “thought leadership” is in the hands of folks of color within the organization, and the majority, if not all, of the “intellectual innovation” happens when white people follow the lead of folks of color or carry out those plans and strategies that have already been conceived.

In the setting of the university, we persistently advocate for our community partner Executive Directors to have a seat at the table. One very positive and tangible outcome of this collective work is that we’ve helped initiate a space where all of the folks at the university who either work with or want to work with an NPO (a specific NPO) come together regularly to coordinate. This will, at its best, allow the Executive Directors to communicate their needs directly, receive more support and access to resources, and have more control over their relationship with the institution; at its worst, there will be appropriation. Placing thought leadership in the hands of the community leaders, however, will take more time and commitment. Another benefit to some of what TU does is the emphasis in community engagement on TU Alumni of Color. This intentional focus is a boon to everyone involved.

In the work, we assess how the dominant paradigm of university/community engagement prioritizes the university’s outcomes and machination over that of *the* community. In this sense, "thought leadership" has a hard time landing in the lap of our Executive Directors even when that “thought leadership” is meant to be a large spoke in the wheel of community engagement. Furthermore, our E.D.s don’t need more work. Being asked to serve on university committees without remuneration isn’t equitable. Charging Black-led grassroots organizations full price for transportation and use of space isn’t equitable. For now, we attempt to prioritize the goals, authority, and the wealth building of organizations, the leaders there, and communities at all times; they lead us on the journey. At times, this can feel at odds with student outcomes; however, if these commitments are transparent and part of the community

engagement strategy, then students learn a very effective method for doing advocacy *with* others. And, if our students are *the* community, wouldn't it be counterproductive to see those two outcomes at odds with each other?

In this sense, as we institutionalize our work we must also reorganize to think of our projects as doing more than “serving,” “delivering” [services], or “doing outreach” (Grabill). We can focus instead on building infrastructure for small, community NPOs and institutionalizing aspects of NPOs within the university itself if that is what the NPOs want. Some questions to consider in an effort to avoid “incorporated resistance” which is a form of “copying,” include: are the primary stakeholders leading the project, especially if the project is intended to grow or continue in the future? Did the project take care to credit all participants and treat historically marginalized groups respectfully and fairly? Are community members included in the feedback and evaluation process in meaningful ways? Are they compensated? Do staff from the organization have a seat at the table? Do they have significant input in how curriculum changes and grows, especially that which directly impacts them? Do they have access to resources on campus? Are interns, independent study participants, student employees (in addition to students in classes), and university staff and administration working for the goals of the NPO? Do NPOs have access to technologies available on campus? Are they offered certain privileges that other campus community members have like discounts on space use and transportation? Is our work at the university helping to grow and sustain the organization's work in ways that would not be possible without the partnership? All of these questions aid in the attempt to repair harm and avoid appropriation which is a form of how whiteness copies. But it also destroys. We must pay attention to appropriation as much as we pay attention to how whiteness can destroy Black wealth and Black innovation.

Whiteness Destroys

The norms of whiteness can push aside and destroy other ways of being and knowing. Kendi tells us that “we must reject cultural standards and level cultural difference” to be anti-racist (176), but we rarely discuss what those cultural standards are. Love asks, what makes a methodology white supremacist (38)? His answer describes a white supremacist methodology as standardizing and centering notions of individualism and objectivity and utilizing knowledge that emerges out of bodies of work rooted in white supremacy. Related, Edgar Villanueva offers a helpful description of white supremacy culture which includes: “perfectionism, sense of urgency, defensiveness, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, paternalism, either/or thinking, fear of open

conflict, individualism, worship of unlimited growth, objectivity, avoidance of discomfort” (45).

Some real-life examples will help show how G.I.V.E. thinks about cultural standards. For one, we’ve been reminded that just because someone is not getting back to you by email absolutely does not mean they aren’t getting the work done off screen (Walker). Because of our commitment to being in relation, we usually are also operating on a regular text and phone basis (rather than only relying on email) with our partners. Our experience with Black-led NPOs in Baltimore and beyond has revealed to us (and is backed by research) that Black-led NPOs receive significantly less funding than their white counterparts and are thus understaffed and overworked relatively (Maryland Nonprofits).

Other questions that have made us think through the harm involved in white cultural norms include: do you find yourself constantly apologizing? Are apologies a search for empathy? Are you in a hurry to get something done? Do you want to rely solely on yourself for getting projects done? Are transactional (versus relational) interactions your default mode (Walker)? Ways that these white norms show up in grant writing and non-profit work are all-encompassing. We often talk about the notion that “you can’t be someone without someone else,” which often translates into prioritizing “being with people” over workplace closures (i.e., meeting deadlines, finalizing decisions, crossing things off lists). It’s not that deadlines are missed or that decisions aren’t made or that goals aren’t reached; rather, the engine of production emerges out of affiliation and rapport. We don’t move forward until all of us in the kinship orb show up. We’ve heard from our partners that it’s less the trauma from working with traumatized communities that burns them out and moreso the injuries caused by whiteness (Walker; Anyanwu, personal interview). There are so many ways of being that are unacknowledged due to whiteness being considered the standard. Another example comes from Molefi Kete Asante’s notion (explained below) of “getting the language correct” (52). When we replace “ex-offender,” “at risk,” or “client” in our language, we are moving the white standard aside. We must do our research to “[get]the language correct” which includes finding out how those we write about want to be talked about. Again, this requires being in relation.

Asante offers another way to delimit cultural standards through his paradigm of Afrocentricity and Africology. Asante writes that Afrocentricity refers “to African agency and the centrality of African interests, ideas, and perspectives in social, historical, behavioral, and economic narratives...Africology is the Afrocentric study of African phenomena trans-generationally and trans-continentially (48). For Asante, western education and culture aggressively avoids African history and civilization and

“robs” Black people of “intellectual and epistemic heritage” (51). Important to his theory is his three approaches to “conceptual liberation” which include: 1) “Getting the language correct”; here, Asante refers to resisting the rhetoric of negativity in relation to Africa and Blackness 2) “Getting facts straight”; here, Asante uses the example of a need to recognize the pyramid as “the functional basis for all modern curriculum” and 3) “Decolonizing of reason”; reason is not solely European. The Greek term *Sophia* (wisdom) is derived from an Egyptian (Kemet) term *Seba* (ibid). The seven principles of Kwanzaa, not attributed to Asante, also offer another explication of cultural standards (see Appendix I for more explanation): Umoja (Unity), Kujichagulia (Self-Determination), Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility), Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics), Nia (Purpose), Kuumba (Creativity), and Imani (Faith) (Taylor). Perhaps most relevant to the NPIC is Asante’s claim that we must change the “[r]hetoric of negativity when it comes to Africa” and that Black people “struggle against all forms of negative assertions” (52-53). Another way we’ve understood how whiteness can also “destroy” is by pathologizing communities and people of color. What makes this so important to resist is the fact that the NPIC feeds itself on pathology. White culture also tends to feed on Black pathology (Love 22). In response, we try to constantly move pathology out of the center of how we think and write about a community. We must perpetually disengage from deficit thinking and re-train ourselves to center assets. Examples include responding to a “needs” or “problem statement” prompt on a grant proposal by flipping the problem to the system in a way like how Brown locates the problem in policies, practices, and budgets rather than communities themselves. That is, the reason that families who have lost loved ones to homicide in Baltimore need and deserve healing is that the system has drained them of access to life promoting resources on just about every level, as both Walker and Anyanwu (personal interview) suggest. By and large, the problem is whiteness and the system of white supremacy.

Lorde’s framework of how whiteness ignores, copies, or destroys Black culture adds limitless insight into NPO and grant writing contexts. As the G.I.V.E project has grown, we’ve learned that the rhetorical/compositional elements of engagement are buttressed by the development of a deep and transparent sense of trust within sustained relationships. Alongside trust is the candid acknowledgement of the harm—not just of white fragility (DiAngelo)—but of whiteness more generally. With the problem of whiteness comes the need to reorient ourselves to the world. From our work, we have noticed that our whiteness can function as an automatic dismissal; when we take things personally, that is a function of narcissism; when we don’t know the facts or the history, we aren’t telling the truth; when we feel responsible, we need to

seek empathy elsewhere. We then can move into a position of knowing, remembering, and doing.

The next section will discuss how G.I.V.E. has localized, prioritized, decolonized grant writing.

How to Localize, Prioritize, & Decolonize

Considering all the way that whiteness tends to ignore, copy, and destroy, we'd now like to offer some specific principles and practical steps for localizing, prioritizing, and decolonizing grant and community engagement work. The process for practicing each of these principles is cyclical and ongoing, requiring learning, deciding, acting, and learning again. It's impossible to navigate community engagement work perfectly, but it is possible—and we argue imperative—to navigate it with conscientious ethical commitment.

Localize

Localizing grant writing and community engagement efforts means working where you are. Not just picking local partners but seeking to deeply understand the histories and needs in the communities that you, your institution, and your neighbors inhabit—before you act. There can be immense power in informed local action, as civil rights organizer Ella Baker articulates: “The major job was getting people to understand that they had something in their power that they could use, and it could only be used if they understood what was happening” (347). Acting right away, without first tuning in to the local community, is an assertion of white ignorance.

Discussions of localization within technical communication spheres typically examine how to adapt a product or design for a new market. It's common for this process to start from the designer/writer, then user testing of local adjustments may come in at a later phase. In Godwin Agboka's reframing, however, avoiding participating in disenfranchisement and exploitation through localization work requires learning about a community's needs from community members themselves, starting at the very beginning of a project (31). Though it may seem obvious from a community engagement perspective that efforts be localized to the specific community context, we wish to draw attention to a similar distinction to Agboka's: there's a difference between doing “local” work from the outside in, versus deeply understanding, listening, and attuning to a local community's needs starting from those with the needs themselves.

Localize, Prioritize, Decolonize

So where do you start localizing? If you're new to local community engagement—or even if you're not—getting started can be intimidating. A good first step in a new place or new arena is to talk to those already there: community engagement offices, already-engaged faculty—what kind of existing work is happening from within your own academic sphere? Do others have recommendations about organizations with needs that fit your skillset? This is of course only one narrow point of entry, but if you can find someone whose interests align with yours, they can be an invaluable guide. Zosha played this role for Carrie upon her arrival at Towson, allowing her to plug into existing relationships, needs, and gaps. Another initial step is a basic general survey—simply Googling organizations in your area, following local news, finding nearby events. You want to get a broad lay of the land. Some instructors even recruit students to take part in this process, creating an index of local organizations as a starting point for engagement. Gaining historical context is also hugely important. What is the university's history in the neighborhood, their reputation for community engagement? What longstanding local and regional issues have shaped the non-profit landscape and community concerns?

There is no singular right way to begin localizing your community engagement and grant writing efforts. Still, there are some approaches that we argue don't really count as localization in a decolonial sense. For instance: Starting your own campaign for an issue as soon as you arrive in a new place. Partnering with a national organization you follow on Twitter, even if you're aiming to take their work local. Jumping immediately to work with the biggest, best-known, and well-funded organization in the area. Anything that's not local, not driven by on-the-ground needs, not working against white supremacist systems—it isn't really localized community engagement.

A critical juncture for localization is deciding who to partner with. You've done your homework and identified numerous local organizations working hard to address community needs. Now, how do you choose? At G.I.V.E., we've found that delineating our selection criteria is incredibly useful to help both breakthrough decision paralysis and keep our local context in view. We draw consciously on Towson University's history in West Baltimore City, where our campus was originally located but moved north because the area had become “unsafe for students” (Pois). This past informs our emphasis on working with organizations in West Baltimore, now one of the most economically suppressed, violence impacted neighborhoods in the city. We try to identify the organizations that most need our support. Those without the resources for a paid grant writer of their own. Those with Black leadership who lack a foothold in the Maryland philanthropic (wealthy, white) social scene. Those responding to on-the-ground community needs related to social justice.

Our whiteness does inherently come into this decision-making process. As we lack the capacity to work with every organization that requests our help (and sometimes those who know enough to request it aren't those who most need it), we must make judgment calls about who receives our support. This is why the "work before" is so important (Pouncil and Sanders). We have to recognize our own biases, understand the systems that create them, and commit to consciously and critically working against them toward social justice in coalition with those with different identities and embodied knowledges of oppression.

It's also important to note that localization is a cyclical, ongoing process. Doing it well takes time, and a constant seeking and openness to new learning. As discussed earlier, G.I.V.E. recently faced a challenge to our commitment to localization as we realized our lack of awareness of injustice taking place right in our own backyard. G.I.V.E. typically prioritizes partnerships in West Baltimore because of Towson's history in the city, but we learned just this year that we had been obliviously unaware of TU's present-day implication in the squeezing out and gentrification of a historically black neighborhood near our campus. How did we not know this was happening? How could we miss this community that has always been here, right on our daily route to school? As the Northeast Towson Improvement Association President, Nancy Goldring, explains it, for a long time this descendant community's survival depended on their invisibility. Now, it will depend on their noise. We still feel that we should have known sooner, but now that we do know, we can help with grant writing support and publicity efforts to make bulldozing this community less easy for the powers-that-be. When confronted with our own white ignorance, we have the critical choice whether to continue ignoring, complicit in community erasure, or to learn, engage, and now—better equipped—to act.

We offer the following questions to consider in efforts to localize community and grant writing work:

- What histories of oppression exist in your area? How can you learn more about these histories (not just from dominant perspectives)?
- Whose voice is unheard, and how can you support amplifying it?
- How are you selecting partners? Can you develop a rubric to evaluate potential fit with your priorities based on your community's needs and history?
- What's driving your attraction toward specific organizations and causes? Can you unpack any biases created by white supremacy?

- Are you identifying the most significant partnership need, or just the most convenient one?

These questions might suggest that we advise against following your passions or personal investment in the causes you support. Not necessarily. Passion and personal connection can be important elements to sustain partnerships. But we would recommend really investigating why your priorities lie where they do, and whether the thing you are most connected to really needs your help the most. Taking the time to learn about your community's history, actors, and greatest needs as identified by community members themselves is a major first step toward community work that is localized, so that you can get on with the deeper action-oriented work that prioritizes community authority through transformational community partnerships.

Prioritize (Community Authority)

Once you've dug into understanding your local community, how do you go about the more day-to-day work of collaborating with community partners? Prioritizing community knowledge and following the lead of the community you serve can often be easier said than done. Sometimes, to be frank, it's not even said. Too often, projects done in the name of solving community ills do not even consult the community whose ills supposedly need solving. As Carlson's study with participants from an economic justice fellowship disconcertingly observed, high profile public projects consistently lacked community voices and input, even when these projects were explicitly intended to support community needs. A big problem here, yet again, is whiteness. Even when intentions are good and a project has identified a real community need, rather than moving forward with decision making in equitable collaboration with the community, something so often turns sideways. Profit gets in the way. Hubris gets in the way. White supremacist structures get in the way. We must begin dismantling whiteness by prioritizing community authority over convenient, ineffective Band-Aids on deep community wounds. This means letting the community be your guide at every step, not just listening to their concerns but actually addressing them, making collaborative decisions, and taking meaningful action.

A big part of the prioritizing work starts with developing cultural competence, in both us and our students working in partnership with communities. As whiteness can destroy other perspectives, we first need to become aware of where we may be imposing white cultural norms. Floyd Pouncil and Nick Sanders offer a helpful model emphasizing "the building of coalitions and centering of Black women's embodied

historical knowledges at the intersections of oppressive social systems...” (284). To reach “upward critical collaboration,” partners must first undergo “inward critical reflection” about their own positionality (Pouncil and Sanders 287). What is informing your judgments of effective versus ineffective strategies, appropriate versus inappropriate behavior, valued versus devalued outcomes? To conscientiously navigate our relationships with others, we need to have a sense of ourselves. When we do, we can participate in “outward critical reflection,” negotiating our positionality and coalition in relation to others in order to collaborate toward shared goals (Pouncil and Sanders 288). At G.I.V.E., we are frequently examining our assumptions, motivations, relational approaches, and points of shared interest, striving to make sure we are really serving community needs and consider how we can do so better.

Even with these reflective practices, it’s not just public officials who can struggle to hear community input. To give an example of how prioritizing the community’s vision can become a challenge in the grant writing classroom: One semester in Carrie’s undergraduate grant writing class, the class was writing to fund an after-school mentoring program. A group of students got excited about the prospect of creating a small library for program participants. When the students pitched the idea to the community partner, the executive director responded that they didn’t think a library would be used, and they didn’t really have the space for one in their small building. The students were disappointed, and a bit indignant. Why wouldn’t they want a library, especially if we could find funding for it? Didn’t they have just a small corner of space to spare? Don’t they want to encourage kids to read?

We’ve seen challenges to following community-expressed needs in service learning come not just from students. Our intent is not to say that there can be no discussion about the right path forward. An environment in which no one can express concerns in deference to one person’s or group’s authority is not collaborative. But neither is one in which white faculty/students/governments bulldoze the community’s articulation of their own needs. In previous articulations of our collaboration tactics with community partners, we’ve found that we can foster equity within our relationships by “balancing perspectives, aligning goals, and ‘showing up’” (Grant 151). When you reach a point of contention navigating a decision with a community partner, it’s a signal that it’s time for some critical reflection. Sometimes, you may conclude that your concerns are in tune with community goals, and it’s worth hashing out your differing perspectives with a partner to see if you can find mutual understanding. But probably more often, you’ll want to defer to your partner’s vision, honoring the lived experiences from those within the community and their right to self-determination.

Localize, Prioritize, Decolonize

In the case of the library, we sought a compromise. The funding source was designated for literacy programs, which were an express part of the organization's mission. But instead of building a library, we proposed a lesson sequence involving the students' school-assigned reading that also included public library visits to foster individual interest in reading. The organization was happy to host a reading program and always appreciates field trip opportunities, so we were able to get at the grant writing students' desire to foster the kids' love of reading, but without imposing an unwanted demand on the organization's small space.

Preparing students for this kind of compromise and deferral to community interests always comes with challenges, but we've found that readings and discussions starting from the beginning of the semester can help. Introduce students to service learning and community engagement principles like reciprocity, civic responsibility, and critical reflection. Help students understand relevant histories to the work you'll be doing. For G.I.V.E., we always start with some background on segregation and inequality in Baltimore. Encourage students to examine their own experiences growing up, and how they have been shaped by circumstance. If you'll be writing on behalf of partners with identity differences, explicitly discuss that challenge and the kinds of language and framework preferences you'll want to honor.

It's important to clarify that prioritizing community authority does not mean co-opting it. There is risk with this principle of enacting white copying through incorporated resistance. Sometimes it's difficult to figure out how to navigate implication with that power dynamic from a community engagement standpoint. For instance, for a past partnership, Carrie was connected with a new neighborhood community center that was interested in developing tools for evaluating their impact on the community. As she was considering the project, Carrie learned that there was some controversy surrounding the new center: it was being built and managed in a city partnership with a nearby megachurch that had a mixed reputation in the community. However, the center would be populated by new offices for several local grassroots organizations with very strong community reputations. The center seemed to be using these organizations to bolster their own credibility, and in the case of at least one of the small NPOs, they felt pressured into joining the new center by the city, who owned the building of their old office. An undercurrent whisper in the community asked, why wasn't one (or several) of the small long-standing neighborhood organizations approached to lead the new center? (The answer, unsurprisingly, involved money and power.)

In a service-learning work group, a peer told Carrie that they personally simply wouldn't partner with the new center—it would be participating in a colonizing

institution. Everyone must face for themselves what they would or wouldn't do from an ethical implication standpoint. What level of compromising community authority is too much? Can harm really be ameliorated from inside corrupt systems? Is there a way to support community leadership as they are trapped under colonizing power? Ultimately, Carrie decided to proceed with the partnership, and over the next few years she was able to slowly start advocating for more community input into the center's decisions. Whether this created much tangible positive change is an unanswered question.

Here are some more questions to consider, and hopefully actually answer, as you navigate your own efforts to prioritize community authority:

- What does the community say that they need? How can you help make that happen?
- How can you work against your own potential biases and positionality within white supremacist systems?
- When having a negative reaction to an idea, unpack why. What assumptions, cultural values or expectations does this bring up for you?
- When the path forward is unclear, can you lay out your concerns openly and critically in collaboration with your community partner?
- How can you honor and support the community's fundamental right to self-determination?

Following the community's vision and taking action to support it are steps toward our ultimate goal in supporting POC-led organizations: decolonizing philanthropy so that POC-led organizations have the autonomy to fulfill their visions themselves without any need for our additional focused support.

Decolonize

Based on 2021 data from Maryland Nonprofits, the top 3.4% of organizations in the state are taking in 92.2% of all non-profit revenue. Of these few top-earning organizations, each with more than \$5 million in revenue, 87% are led by a white executive director. When we talk about decolonizing philanthropy, this is the unjust state of funding that demands dismantling. The white supremacist structures still in place within the philanthropic sphere enact all three modes of problematic whiteness. These systems ignore grassroots Black leadership, denying the value of their work by

denying them access to funding that could transform their communities without colonizing control. White philanthropy simultaneously copies Black ideas—taking credit for adopting lofty progressive aims, then bastardizing (or still ignoring) them in practice. Ultimately, colonized philanthropy destroys Black communities—through both neglect and the active harm of misguided efforts to enforce white visions of “help.”

Decolonizing philanthropy is a large-scale goal obviously, not an individually achievable effort like localizing your own projects and prioritizing your partners’ goals can be. However, we do believe that individual action can play a part toward broader change. Thinking of individual action that can leverage institutional power, university-based community grant writing programs like G.I.V.E. can enact distributive justice reaching the scale of thousands or even millions of dollars. As we’ve discussed, our goal is to redistribute power, by way of funding, back to communities themselves. To do that, we are expanding access to the typically guarded knowledge and resources of the university, in order to help community organizations better speak to the guarded institutions of philanthropic funding. If our grant writing efforts of just the small team at G.I.V.E. can shift that percentage of funding going to small, Black-led organizations even slightly, then we are taking small steps toward decolonization.

We don’t intend to be self-congratulatory here—there is always so much more we can do, should be doing, and don’t yet know how to do to help decolonize communities’ access to resources. But we have experienced how keeping the vision of systemic change in sight can return dividends. If localizing is about understanding your community, and prioritizing is about following its lead, then decolonizing is about standing up for injustices against it. This is the arena where action is often least comfortable, but most important, and your identity becomes most valuable to serving community needs. G.I.V.E. constantly reflects on where we can use our whiteness and institutional circumstances to advocate for our partner organizations’ goals. For instance, potential funders tend to like to see G.I.V.E. representatives in meetings, lending white credibility to our partner organizations’ leadership, as well as our institutional backing and feel-good story of students’ contributions. Our intent is for this credibility exchange to operate in the inverse of the community center example from the previous section. Rather than co-opting our partners’ credibility with the community, we are letting them use ours for upward institutional power. We are arguing for our partners’ places at the tables we have access to. We are putting our necks on the line to verbalize the risky critiques that could cost our partners some powerful person’s support.

An example of risky critique we're currently navigating comes from a G.I.V.E. intern's experience at a recent community partner event hosted on Towson's campus. In a college access panel for Baltimore City youth, a Towson University office shared information on financial aid that our intern found to be inaccessible, alienating, and detrimental to encouraging participants' college pursuits. When our intern shared this experience with us at one of our staff meetings, we had a choice: Do we say, "Oh, that's a shame," dismiss the issue, and move on? Or do we think about how we can stand up against it, try to turn this one instance into a small opportunity for decolonizing college access? It wasn't fun to think about how best to initiate these conversations with our university's administration, but it was important. We are supporting our intern to lead the conversation, building up her own institutional navigation skill set while also offering our firm backing to push the issue forward. It's as of yet unresolved, but we're hopeful that there's a chance here to take baby steps toward making Towson University more accessible rather than foreclosing access. And all this effort is being made without risking our community partner's relationship with the university. The critique is coming from us, from within.

As you imagine a scaled-up vision for decolonizing philanthropy or any community arena you work in, here are some questions to think about:

- How can you leverage your position, identity, or credibility to build up your community partners'?
- What would community autonomy look like in navigating solving this issue? Are there steps you can take toward making that a reality?
- How can you help your community partner gain access to more resources within your university? Within other spheres you have access to?
- What critiques can you make more comfortably from your position so that your partners don't have to take the risk?
- Where's the money, and how can you help redistribute it?

Decolonizing philanthropy, of course, can't be accomplished overnight if it ever can in full. But we can work towards it, using our hard-earned localized understanding of our communities and prioritization of their interests as a guide to seeing and taking opportunities to dismantle white supremacy, one source of power at a time.

Conclusion

For now, we need to advocate for more resources to be directed toward POC-led organizations and for Predominantly White Institutions to install the thought leadership of POC. We need to reflect critically on the problem of whiteness and take steps toward dismantling white supremacy wherever possible. As we become conscious of how (our) whiteness ignores, copies, and destroys, we can begin working against it by localizing, prioritizing, and decolonizing our community grant writing and engagement efforts.

At G.I.V.E., we feel we've come a long way on our journey in community grant writing. Growing from Zosha's unfunded project in a graduate class to now having two regular faculty (with the addition of Carrie), four different regular course offerings, and a cycle of student interns, we now have more institutional power and support to leverage toward stronger outcomes for our community partners. We've learned through trial and error where we've overstepped in imposing expectations on our partners, as well as where we've underdelivered on their expectations of us. And we still have much to learn. We continue to grapple with the challenge of being white women faculty mentoring our interns who are young women of color. We don't have clear answers for how to get funders to take our partners more seriously while upholding their autonomy in decision-making. We are yet again surprised (though our partners are not) when someone we thought was an ally turns out not to have done the work before to unpack their own whiteness. We must learn our limits.

Moving forward, more support for decolonial grant writing and community work is needed, both across institutions and within our field, including addressing questions we couldn't get to in this article: Is there a replicable model for community grant writing classes? How do you effectively argue for funding from your university to initiate programs? What about getting them to value these efforts for tenure and promotion? How do we sustain what can be exhausting, at times discouraging, work? But localizing, prioritizing, and decolonizing where we can is a start, as we consciously support POC-led organizations of color in their missions toward autonomy and self-determination for their communities.

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Stuckey and Grant

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Appendix I

The seven principles of Kwanzaa also offer another explication of cultural standards:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/21/dining/kwanzaa-seven-principles.html>

“Umoja (Unity)

To strive for and maintain unity in family, community, nation, and race.

Kujichagulia (Self-Determination)

To define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves.

Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility)

To build and maintain our community together and make our brother’s and sister’s problems our problems and to solve them together.

Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics)

To build and maintain our own stores, shops, and other businesses and to profit from them together.

Nia (Purpose)

To make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness.

Kuumba (Creativity)

To do always as much as we can, in the way we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.

Imani (Faith)

To believe with all our heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders and the righteousness and victory of our struggle.” (is all a quote from the NY Times article)

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