

# Rethinking the Field in Crisis: The Baltimore Field School and Building Ethical Community and University Partnerships

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## Abstract

This Projects With Promise case study offers insights for addressing tensions between universities and communities in building partnerships and collectively rethinking “the field” of community engagement. We explore moving beyond a solely place-based understanding of “the field” into an ethos based on human interactions and mutual trust. Through an analysis of the Baltimore Field School (BFS) project, we argue that partnerships must be designed to create the time and space for self-reflexive qualitative methods that emerge from a personality-proof and sustainable infrastructure that can respond to crises and needs in both communities and universities. Rethinking and even “undoing” notions of institutional time and space within universities allows community-centered reflection that begins to cross the boundaries imposed by neoliberal institutions focused on profits above people. Exploring the distinct scholarly communities of higher education can inspire academics to rethink how universities can work with and not just for local communities.

*Keywords: public humanities, urban studies, field research, research ethics, crisis*



*I say within the next 10 to 20 years, University of Maryland [Baltimore] and Johns Hopkins [University] is taking over the entire city. University of Maryland is taking over West Baltimore and Johns Hopkins is taking over East Baltimore. And that's just how it is. They unstoppable.*

—Baltimore resident, “Word on the Street” from the *Downtown Voices* podcast series (Holter & Singlenberg, 2016, 9:24–9:38)

Universities have long served as agents of gentrification and employed extractive research practices in Baltimore, Maryland and cities like it (D. L. Baldwin, 2021; Moos et al., 2019). In light of this institutional history, how can university faculty, staff, and graduate students develop more ethical and equitable humanities-based community engagement projects in city neighborhoods? This guiding question informed the planning, execution, and assessment in the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) inaugural Baltimore Field School (BFS) in summer 2021 and the planning for the BFS 2.0 in July 2023. BFS is a humanities-based training intensive designed to create an infrastructure of engagement for faculty and graduate students to collaborate with community partners in Baltimore in ways that share power and are mutually beneficial (Fouts, 2020; Wollschleger et al., 2020). In 2019, the BFS was developed based on the theory that ethical principles for collaborative work in city neighborhoods would organically emerge through relationship

building “in the field”—working directly in city neighborhoods with local partners in South and Southwest Baltimore (Yamamura & Koth, 2018). Such a grounding pushes humanities research outside university offices, classrooms, or laboratories and into the city while critically rethinking “the field” of the humanities itself to be more publicly engaged with local communities in meaningful ways. From moving “out of the classroom and into history” (Scarlett et al., 2019, p. 11) toward “experiential, affective and critical learning in engaged fieldwork” (Golubchikov, 2015, p. 143), we shifted our focus and our resources to city neighborhoods through the process of building Community Fellows partnerships. However, our early thinking of “the field” solely in terms of place needed to expand, and we began to rethink “the field” as a place-based ethical position. Place matters only when people give space meaning (Tuan, 1977). “Methods as ethics” was a theme in our early discussions—meaning, how you do the work and engage with other human beings is a direct reflection of the project’s ethos.

Building productive partnerships requires first showing up and listening, with the goal of “doing no harm” (Kostovicova & Knott, 2022). In this work, we acknowledge the numerous ways that institutional expansion in cities often displaces residents of Black neighborhoods and university researchers often collect information from Black residents that is not used to correct historical injustices imposed upon their communities (Brown, 2021). For the first iteration of the project, we worked with foundational partners and Community Fellows Eric Jackson (Partner 1, P1) of Black Yield Institute (BYI)—a Pan-African power institution in the Cherry Hill neighborhood of South Baltimore that serves as a collective action network and community farm to address food apartheid—and Curtis Eaddy II (Partner 2, P2) of the Southwest Partnership—a nonprofit coalition of seven neighborhoods and seven institutions working together to build a better community in West Baltimore. Both foundational partners had worked with university faculty on previous projects in some capacity. The goal of BFS was to provide a space to collectively and openly acknowledge, discuss, and negotiate power, perception, and expectations from the inception of project planning while allowing for the organic evolution of projects over time.

The perceptions, expectations, and goals of Community Fellow partners Jackson (P1) and Eaddy (P2) were outlined in the *Pre-Evaluation Report* (Mahdi, 2021a) completed early in the planning process. This report highlighted their expectation that BFS would be a “mutually beneficial” endeavor between their organizations, the university, and the people in the neighborhoods served by their organizations. Both partners described very concrete ways in which an engaged group of university scholars could join and assist residents in promoting their own projects on the preservation of culture, teaching neighborhood history, and building community power. Each described specific tasks such as assisting with collecting stories from residents, working with residents to create multimedia products for distribution, and offering support to navigate Baltimore City’s barriers of red tape and bureaucracy that hindered residents’ goals of thriving in their neighborhoods (Mahdi, 2021a).

We knew that reflecting on the historical harm done by powerful institutions would be a difficult but necessary part of building trust. Community-engaged humanities is often touted as addressing real-world problems through a “relational model of engagement” (Schalet et al., 2020). However, we did not anticipate “the field” itself shifting from a physical place in city neighborhoods to virtual space due to the global COVID-19 public health crisis. The situation of crisis and shifting spatial dynamics exacerbated the central tension between human individuals and bureaucratic institutions. Through honest conversations and integrating self-reflexive assessment throughout all stages of the process, we tried to see humanity within (or perhaps beyond) institutional structures in the process of rethinking the field of publicly engaged humanities (Harkavy & Hartley, 2012; Schroeder, 2021; Woodward, 2009).

This Projects With Promise case study offers insights into the ethical tensions between universities and communities and the difficulty of collectively rethinking “the field” of community engagement through various crises—from uprisings to displacement. We cannot predict crises, but we can build trust and formulate principles that enable our institutions to cope with them in productive and humane ways, despite the neoliberal universities’ settler-colonial focus on expansion and prioritization of profits over people and a failure to see and hear people

already on the land or in the neighborhood doing the work (Baker, 2020; D. L. Baldwin, 2021; Brown, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Neoliberal cities and universities operate by an “ideology that privileges profits and prizes private and corporate entities as the ideal providers of public services” (King et al., p. 2). The BFS project team felt that such a transactional ideology should not dominate community engagement discourses in higher education. Of course, money matters, but the work focuses on the dignity of human relationships.

Through an analysis of the 2021 inaugural BFS, we argue for the importance of building relationships and a comprehensive and self-reflexive evaluation and assessment process at the start of university-community partnerships. Ethical partnerships must be mutually beneficial, with scholars and researchers being thoughtful in how and when they show up and deeply listening to local residents and community members already doing the work. University employees should do no harm—that is, we should strive to avoid extracting community stories and resources primarily for our own personal gain—in the process of any university public humanities project.

### The History and Evolution of BFS

The idea and ethos of BFS evolved from the impacts of the 2015 Baltimore Uprising—protests and unrest following the death of Freddie Gray in April 2015 while in police custody—on the city and those who live and work there. The Uprising pushed scholars working in and on Baltimore to refocus researching, teaching, and archiving on the impacts of segregation and racism while building a more inclusive history of the city (Meringolo, 2015). Collective thinking on addressing such moments—and working with, not just for, the community—led to the development of a working group focused on building an undergraduate public humanities program focused on Baltimore at our university.

From 2016 to 2019, UMBC’s Public Humanities Working Group developed the first public humanities program in the United States focused specifically on undergraduate education with a minor in Public Humanities (Schroeder, 2021). In fall 2019, the inaugural Introduction to Public Humanities seminar, Listening to the City, piloted a Community Fellows program funded by a Humanities Teaching Lab course

transformation grant from the university’s Dresher Center for the Humanities. We knew we could not build this program the right way without the expertise of community leaders (Fisher, 2019), who often are not inclined to trust scholars and universities, as academia has a history of swooping in to extract stories and data without mutual benefit (Sanjek, 2015).

BFS was designed to move away from such extractive research models for humanities-based urban studies projects (Coldiron & Capó, 2022). The program was jointly influenced by greater scholarly and media attention on Baltimore following the uprisings in the city—and the larger Black Lives Matter movement—and the flourishing of research and collective work as part of the “Baltimore School.” In a quote printed on the back cover of the collection *Baltimore Revisited: Stories of Inequality and Resistance in a U.S. City* (King et al., 2019), political scientist Lester Spence described an emerging Baltimore School of inquiry, which “seeks to radically change how we understand cities and how we redistribute resources within them, by taking space, race, and political economy seriously.” This line of inquiry (Brown, 2021; Fabricant, 2022; Rizzo, 2020) fuels humanistic scholarship and meaningful engagement with neighborhoods in Baltimore City. However, before building an infrastructure for engagement at universities, we needed to unlearn and rethink the role of university employees working on the ground in the city with our Community Fellows (Pulido, 2008; Tuck, 2009).

### BFS Planning, 2020–2021: What We Wanted to Do

In January 2020, we received a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and built a project team. In addition to our two foundational community partners (Jackson, P1, and Eaddy, P2), our core project team from the university included the dean of our college, chair of the department where the public humanities minor is located, and an assessment coordinator and program manager—both university alumni with strong connections to Baltimore. The dean convened a BFS advisory group of humanities faculty from across the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. We had our first group meeting on March 11, 2020. We affirmed our goals: (1) convene, listen to, and plan with community partners; (2) develop ethical principles for public humanities research and teaching; (3) pilot

a Baltimore Field School summer institute to build a community of practice; and (4) develop an infrastructure of engagement for undergraduate education and research. We welcomed the tensions and were committed to performing the difficult work with our Community Fellows.

The following day—March 12, 2020—our plans were altered when the COVID-19 global pandemic shut down all in-person operations at the university. We soon paused the project and were granted a one-year extension from our funder. During the global health crisis in early 2020, many large institutions were able to shift resources. We shifted funds already allocated to in-person public humanities programming to directly support our BFS partners' needs to address pressing public health and food access crises. For example, funding for a public campus film event on Arabbers—Black food vendors who have traditionally delivered produce by horse-drawn wagon in neighborhoods suffering from food apartheid—was shifted to support a local farmer and artist who made a COVID-19 public health zine distributed by Arabbers in the majority-Black neighborhoods they serve in Baltimore. As we know, the pandemic increased the inequities already present in society. Crisis harms some more than others.

In fall 2020, Jackson (P1) and BYI—an organization focused on food justice issues in Black neighborhoods—collaborated with our Introduction to Public Humanities seminar for virtual events and the creation of a digital timeline that was turned over to the organization. Jackson (P1) had already established that community ownership of research data and stories was essential during our initial BFS planning. The Preserving Places, Making Spaces in Baltimore public humanities course worked with Eaddy (P2) on the A Place Called Poppleton project—documenting the history and culture of the Poppleton neighborhood of West Baltimore. The project (Baltimore Traces, 2021) focuses on the neighborhood's rich Black history and places and people in danger of being displaced due to urban renewal and redevelopment projects by Baltimore City and outside developers.

Within this context, we began to reboot planning for the BFS in the beginning of 2021. Our entire team was dealing with the new normal of an ongoing global pandemic that severely limited face-to-face connections and place-based experiences *in the*

*field* as we had envisioned back in 2019. With these unprecedented transitions, our assessment coordinator became essential for rethinking our project. The *Pre-Evaluation Report* of February 2021 (Mahdi, 2021a) was “composed to inform Baltimore Field School planning by illuminating community partners' stated objectives and goals, promoting transparency in the project processes, and providing valuable information for project participants and other stakeholders” (p. 4). Our community partners' goals were to “embrace historical reconciliation specifically regarding Black/majority-Black communities and neighborhoods and harms imposed upon them” (p.7). by Baltimore institutions. Examples included university-related expansions by Johns Hopkins University (JHU) and University of Maryland Baltimore (UMB) that displaced residents in neighborhoods in East and West Baltimore, respectively, or research that treated these residents like lab rats in an experiment. Our partners desired to “create a new culture of shared power in university-community partnerships” (Mahdi, 2021a, pp. 5–6).

The 2021 BFS *Pre-Evaluation Report* (Mahdi, 2021a) illuminated the ways in which the project team were on the same page with project goals before they selected participants from the university. It was necessary, given the intention of building an infrastructure for collaborative work, to demonstrate that community partners do not enter into university engagements as blank slates waiting to accommodate the teaching and research goals of scholars. Perhaps the most promising aspect of the BFS project was that the project team (college dean, department chair, assessment coordinator, and program manager) all had extensive backgrounds in community work—outside the highly structured, grant-funded opportunities attached to universities' institutional objectives. The team agreed that even though money (how a project is funded and how each entity is compensated), power, race, and shared ownership of data and outputs are crucial elements of such partnerships, these topics are often avoided when university personnel plan projects for communities.

Addressing the harm of powerful institutions connects to projects like Martha S. Jones's Hard Histories Project (<https://snfagora.jhu.edu/project/hard-histories-at-johns-hopkins/>) launched in 2020 at JHU, the largest employer in Baltimore City. The project examines the role that histories of



racism and discrimination have played at JHU and beyond. This “historical reconciliation” and the role of money and power in such partnerships in the current day were central tensions, and community partners “discussed positive relationships with individuals at [universities], as well as concerns about the university as an institution with the power to undermine this work” (Mahdi, 2021a, p. 6).

Eaddy (P2) was quoted in the report: “We are asking people [in our communities] to be vulnerable. They trust the individuals, not organizations” (Mahdi, 2021a, p. 10). Jackson (P1) pointed out, “This project seeks to go beyond liberalism, to shift power in the [university–community] relationship, and to use that power to support [the community]” (Mahdi, 2021a, p. 16). The report suggested: “Engaging the humanity within an institution can be a protective force against the violence of bureaucracy” (Mahdi, 2021a, p. 16). Clearly, the project goals required directly addressing the tensions of universities and how they have historically worked for and not always with communities.

The pre-evaluation also revealed that potential participants in BFS were split in preferring in-person or virtual programming. Based on issues of accessibility and safety, we decided the inaugural BFS would be virtual with some optional in-person outdoor events.

### **The Inaugural BFS, June 21–June 25, 2021: What We Did**

We created a (virtual) and nonhierarchical space where tenure-track faculty and graduate student fellows (funded at \$3,000 each) met on equal terms with our partnering Community Fellows (\$4,000 each). We funded 14 university fellows (eight assistant professors and six graduate students) and invited 19 speakers from humanities institutions and community organizations (see 2021 BFS schedule, <https://baltimore-fieldschool.org/?p=2628>). Speakers received \$500 honoraria for participating in BFS panels. June 21–25, 2021, our virtual programming engaged with community partners, discussed publicly engaged methodologies, and built community. We concluded programming with a walking tour led by Eaddy (P2) in the Poppleton neighborhood of West Baltimore—where our university’s downtown classroom was located and a university BioPark development project was connected to the potential gentrification of

the neighborhood and displacement of residents (Brown, 2015).

We began by discussing the essay “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor” (Tuck & Yang, 2012) to define what we were doing and what we were trying not to do—performative inclusion. Use of the “decolonial” metaphor in our call for fellow applications brought about tension in the working group; group members recognized that such metaphors can let us—scholars and Community Fellows—off the hook without really reckoning with the tensions and harmful settler-colonial practices within both U.S. institutions in general and higher education specifically. The tensions between Black and Indigenous efforts for land sovereignty showed the importance of the time invested building trust and holding space for honest conversations on difficult and complicated topics. The overarching outcomes for university fellows were to produce (1) personal research statements (individual manifestos) and (2) collective ethical principles for collaborating on public humanities work in Baltimore. We also provided space for the community partners to determine the organization of the inaugural BFS.

### **Sovereignty Is Community Control and Ownership**

Jackson (P1) spoke to university fellows on the first day with a talk, “Sovereignty and Relationships With the Academy,” defining how power worked, and a panel “Embodying Black Land & Food Sovereignty,” exploring what sovereignty can look like. Day 2 began with Eaddy (P2) discussing the A Place Called Poppleton community–university collaboration and then a public panel later in the week on how art can help process trauma in Black neighborhoods in Baltimore, “The Beautiful Side of Ugly: Unspoken Discussion Panel.” We analyzed transcripts of those first days of the BFS with our partners as a way to find themes within difficult but honest conversations (Koopman & Seliga, 2021; Sutcliffe, 2021).

Jackson (P1) began by pointing out “there is an unnecessary dichotomy between academy and community” (Jackson, 2021a). He defined “sovereignty” as “ultimately about how we [the local community] largely control the narratives, the relationships, and how those relationships go, especially when it relates to white institutions.” Jackson (P1) framed the importance of sovereignty very clearly: “Look, if you want to help us, it has

to be on our terms. And it has to be what we are doing.” He discussed “radical accountability” and how communities must own their own data and own their own stories. Jackson (P1) referenced the BFS project director’s thorough understanding of such contractual issues of ownership by acknowledging that his organization “combs through those documents.” This mention of contractual issues reflected that the university had sent Community Fellows the stock “Contract for Consultant Service,” in which Section 4.1 “Ownership of Intellectual Property” stated that “all designs, plans, reports, etc. [New Developments] shall be assigned to University as its sole and exclusive property.”

This clause went against the ethos of engagement the project was based on. Once Jackson (P1) brought this language to the project team’s attention, we shared the language in the original grant application on intellectual property with the university procurement team handling the contracts: “Key issues to be explored in the course of this planning grant include intellectual property, public access, and shared ownership of knowledge.” Furthermore, the language in the grant stated: “We do not foresee the requirement to copyright or license any cultural or intellectual materials produced. In the spirit of the project, these materials will be licensed in accordance with the principles of Creative Commons” (quotes come directly from the grant proposal).

Jackson’s (P1) discussion of ownership/sovereignty on the first day of the field school offers the valuable lesson that project ethics and university contracts must align from the inception of a project. Because Jackson (P1) performed due diligence in closely reading contractual documents and because the project team had written “shared ownership” into the original grant, we were able to challenge and alter the stock language in the institutional contracts. Staff in grants and procurement offices should be involved in the planning of projects from the inception so they understand the complexities of the project goals; however, institutional policies should be challenged and changed when they do not align with ethical practices. As Jackson (P1) stated in his talk: “And if we want to show real commitment to moving away from traditional means of scholarship, a radical scholarship means that you have to change your process” (Jackson, 2021a).

### **Who Do You Speak For/As? Informed Consent Is an Ongoing Process**

When Curtis Eaddy (P2) spoke about the A Place Called Poppleton project, we delved into issues of informed consent. Eaddy (P2) explained how the Baltimore Traces project team, which has IRB approval, would not only obtain signed consent forms but would bring back the interview transcripts and, especially, edited media or videos for review before public release or archiving on the project’s website. Informed consent, like all forms of consent, should be an ongoing process that centers transparency and positionality. We discussed the first time we went to interview Eaddy (P2) at his family home in Poppleton in 2019. Before the camera started rolling, he asked who we wanted to interview, “Curtis Eaddy who works for the Southwest Partnership or Curtis who grew up in Poppleton [one of the seven West Baltimore neighborhoods in the Southwest Partnership].” The team responded that we wanted to interview whomever Eaddy (P2) wanted to speak as. He (P2) decided to speak from the position of someone who grew up in the neighborhood. Eaddy (P2) made the choice to speak as an individual rather than for the institution where he worked—a complicated choice to navigate in the field.

The project team discussed the tensions and emotions surrounding speaking as an individual versus speaking as and for an institution, especially in emotional situations such as families—like the Eaddys—being displaced from their homes. A team member explained, “I have a relationship with Curtis [Eaddy, P2] and his family, and his mother, and at those moments, you have to decide who you’re going to be and what part of yourself you’re putting forward” (Eaddy, 2021, p. 5). Eaddy (P2) added a similar sentiment: “I had to then choose which side I would fight for. . . . I can’t go against my job at one end, and then the other, assisting my family from, from preserving their, our family home.” Eaddy (P2) explained his own conflicts from his job and his personal connections: “You have to make decisions and choices in your life. . . . Sometimes you got to put things aside and say, look, this is what’s right” (Eaddy, 2021, p. 6).

These virtual conversations unpacked actual collaborations in the field. We came to understand that there is no single set of ethical principles to institutionalize. Instead, issues and processes must be considered in relation to current issues of how power is perceived

and experienced in the field at that moment. As much as possible, these issues must be worked out in advance and in dialogue with those most affected on the ground. As Jackson (P1) summarized, this work is really about “relationships with people.” He continued: “If we’re actually going to have a Baltimore Field School, honor the field, and this is the field right here, you know what I’m saying? We are the field” (Jackson, 2021b).

### Notes From the Field

In addition to our foundational partners (Jackson, P1, and Eaddy, P2), we had panels led by project consultants—scholars on Baltimore history and culture and experts in public humanities. Consultant Mary Rizzo (Rutgers University, Newark) wrote the 2020 book *Come and Be Shocked: Baltimore Beyond John Waters and The Wire* (Rizzo, 2020), exploring the cultural representations of the city in popular culture and imagination since the 1950s. She also started the Chicory Revitalization Project (<https://collections.digitalmaryland.org/digital/collection/mdcy>) and led a session, “Black Poetry Does: Connecting Young People to Their History Through Poetry” with her community partners. Consultants Nicole Fabricant (Towson University), author of 2022’s *Fighting to Breathe: Race, Toxicity, and the Rise of Youth Activism in Baltimore* (Fabricant, 2022), and Lawrence Brown (Morgan State University), author of 2021’s *The Black Butterfly: The Harmful Politics of Race and Space in America* (Brown, 2021), are also collaborators in the field. They coled a session, “Nurturing an Ethics of Solidarity & Care: Fostering Collective Impact in the Public Sphere” influenced by “FAQs: Frequently (Un)Asked Questions About Being a Scholar Activist” (Pulido, 2008). All these project consultants have worked together collectively in some way and published early research for their monographs in the 2019 *Baltimore Revisited* (King et al., 2019) collection.

We concluded the summer institute with colleague consultants who left academia to work in the public sector. Michelle Stefano, who also has a chapter in *Baltimore Revisited* (King et al., 2019), organized a panel discussion, “Community Collections at the American Folklife Center.” The discussion provided specific examples of the politics and practices for building community-led archives (Caswell et al., 2017; Stefano, 2021). Samir Meghelli, who is a curator at the Smithsonian Institution’s Anacostia

Community Museum—the first federally funded community museum in the United States—led the concluding session, “The Practice of Public Scholarship in a Gentrifying City: Working in, With, and for Communities.” Meghelli discussed the theory and practice (Glee & Robles-Inman, 2019) of public projects he worked on in D.C. with local communities. During the post-project assessment, one of the BFS university fellows described the week: “It was too much, and also not enough” (Mahdi, 2021b).

We could not show up in the ways we planned back in 2019; however, our understanding of the field shifted from a place in a neighborhood to encompass the ethical relationships to other human beings located in place. Understanding the human component of “the field” was important, as our two foundational partners were both dealing with real human crises of displacement during the inaugural summer 2021 BFS summer institute.

In early 2021, Jackson (P1) and his organization had received notice of eviction from their community farm in Cherry Hill from Housing Authority of Baltimore City and held a rally on their land the weekend after the BFS summer institute on Saturday, July 3. Local newspaper the *Baltimore Sun* published an article on the displacement, “The Cherry Hill Urban Community Garden Has Served the Neighborhood for Decades: Now, It’s Facing the Threat of Eviction” (Campbell, 2021). Eaddy (P2) and his family and neighbors in Poppleton were also facing displacement through the use of eminent domain by the Baltimore City Department of Housing and Community Development for a long-stalled redevelopment project. His mother, Sonia Eaddy, led the fight against displacement in Poppleton from 2004 to the present. On Saturday, July 10, 2021, Poppleton residents and supporters held a Save Our Block rally in the Sarah Ann Street park to fight to save the Eaddy family home from condemnation and to keep tenants of the historic Sarah Ann Street alley houses from being displaced. On July 23, 2021, Sonia Eaddy appeared on the front page of the *Baltimore Sun* in an article reporting on the displacement of her neighbors, “As Baltimore’s Poppleton Neighborhood Braces for Change, Residents Liken It to a ‘Family’ Being Broken Apart” (Miller, 2021). Many in the BFS community showed up at these rallies to listen and offer support.

University entanglements with development



projects can also lead to harm. The redevelopment of the Poppleton neighborhood was connected to the University of Maryland, Baltimore's BioPark (a public-private partnership) moving into Poppleton and West Baltimore in 2004 (Beamon, 2004). The quote from "Word on the Street" at the beginning of this article alludes to that expansion of the universities into disinvested neighborhoods in Baltimore. However, the A Place Called Poppleton cultural documentation project based on a BFS university-community partnership sought to fight for development without displacement with residents in Poppleton.

Even as they collaborated with us, our two foundational partners were dealing with crises of displacement in addition to the ongoing global pandemic. This juxtaposition reflects the ongoing and constant crises in 21st-century society, especially in Baltimore's majority-Black neighborhoods, that call for a response from community-engaged public humanities. Can universities develop public humanities projects that repair damage from past or ongoing harm?

### **Eliminating Unnecessary Dichotomies and What We Learned**

There has to be, from my perspective, an undoing process and a "doing anew" process. And I think that the way that Baltimore Field School is designed right now is the "doing anew" and not really enough time in undoing. . . . We use the right words, but our methodologies don't change because we don't unlearn them and we don't spend enough time there unpacking, undoing, feeling like the world is over . . . and then finding ways, very smart and nuanced ways, of learning to walk again.—Eric Jackson (P1), BYI (Mahdi, 2021c, p. 36)

Undoing harmful institutional procedures and policies in community engagement and research is a process that takes time, reflection, and established relationships. As seen in our process with BFS, residents of disinvested neighborhoods have been vocal about their lack of trust in institutions.

The project assessment following the week-long summer institute found that the 14 university BFS fellows noticed and appreciated the sustained relationships between the

university project team and the community partners (Mahdi, 2021c). Qualitative analysis of fellows' focus groups generated themes among strengths and benefits of the BFS, including building community with colleagues doing similar work, learning more about "the real" or "the true" Baltimore, exposure to a wider array of ways to think about ethics, and a notable absence of hierarchical roles between the participating graduate students and professors. University fellows also reported immediate personal and professional growth during and after the summer institute, such as increased confidence in their ability to teach publicly engaged humanities, increased perspective into career options, and increased commitment to collaboration. Moreover, fellows detailed new insights into ideas of mutual benefit between universities and communities, checking their egos, and allowing the work to take a longer time than expected.

The latter insight is one of the ways in which time, especially *moving at the speed of the work*, emerged as a primary theme. In this case, university fellows described learning more about "slow scholarship" (Berg & Seeber, 2016) as it pertains to deep listening and relationship building to ensure mutual benefit. They connected the idea of more time on a project to the intention of establishing trust, sustainability, and longevity with community partners. This connection also weighs heavily in the recommendations from the evaluation report: time—specifically deceleration and extension of the Baltimore Field School learning processes—allows for the relationship-building infrastructure needed on and off campus. Close examination of these themes—time and relationship building—serves to illuminate the difficulty in resolving what Jackson (P1) called "the unnecessary dichotomy" between university and community.

### **Time and Relationship Building: Moving at the Speed of the Work**

When asked what they would have changed, focus group participants from the university discussed wanting more time to debrief with one another after panels, more time to learn about one another's work, and more how-to discussions about real and hypothetical ethical dilemmas. Commonalities among fellows' suggestions for future iterations of the BFS included "unstructured time" to socialize together, opening participation to university staff, and time dedicated to cultivating this community of like-minded



individuals on campus. Despite fellows' expressed desires for more time spent on these matters, when asked specifically about their thoughts on the time structure of the summer institute, professors were more likely than graduate students to say that, because of personal and professional time constraints, they could not imagine the summer institute lasting longer than one week. Some of the graduate student participants suggested a 2-week structure. Most fellows did reiterate, however, that an in-person format, made impossible by the COVID-19 safety measures, would have provided the peer interaction they were missing.

These evaluation findings regarding fellows' opinions on the time required for the BFS may appear inconsistent on the surface, but academics might find a familiar understanding in the conflicting perceptions. Fellows confirmed that the brief "intensive" structure of the program, which allowed for concentrated delivery of new, useful knowledge in a convenient/desired time frame, contributed to their professional goals and met their expectations (13 out of 14 participants). Confirming the "too much, but also not enough" paradox described by one participant, fellows still wanted more time to focus on campus-based relationships and to absorb the new information. This contrast in perceptions of sufficient time, taken in consideration with fellows' desire for more how-to instruction, is consistent with the institutional structure in which academics are socialized and prepared for careers. A concise time schedule is the basis of universities' educational structures, with knowledge (courses) prearranged in a systematic format (semesters). After a predetermined progression of how-to instruction, the academic is awarded with confirmation that levels of sufficient proficiency have been achieved, from undergraduate degrees through the doctoral level, even from post-doc positions through full professorship. This professional structure matches the fellows' expectation that within a week or two, the BFS could provide new insights on ethics, information about the city, peer socialization, how-to instruction on relationship building with community collaborators, and how-to instruction on the logistics of carrying out a project. An awareness of the professional socialization process of academia underscores Jackson's (P1) observation that an *undoing* process is necessary if the BFS is to be successful in creating an

infrastructure for publicly engaged research and teaching.

Time was also a consistent theme from the community partners' perspectives, from the pre-evaluation to the final evaluation following the summer institute. In the final evaluation, one finding highlighted how a well-established relationship between university personnel and a community partner is different from the usual university-community partnership established within the guidelines and schedule of one specific grant-based project. The pre-evaluation emphasized Jackson's (P1) and Eaddy's (P2) assertions that they had working relationships and a level of trust with individuals from the university, not with the university itself. Jackson (P1) and Eaddy (P2) also pointed out that the work was funded by a grant from a foundation, not from the university. In individual interviews after the summer institute, Jackson (P1) and Eaddy (P2) discussed BFS, but also referenced other instances in which they worked with or were in community with members of the project team.

These data suggest that within the context of a well-established partnership, community partners' and university personnel's experiences with a specific grant-funded project—for example, BFS—may be conflated with other activities and projects that have happened during their relationship. In a group interview, a project team member also confirmed that she was not inclined or able to compartmentalize her public scholarship by project or task. "I can't disentangle . . . the work that I'm doing in Poppleton and my commitment to housing justice in the city that has come out of the past couple of years" (Mahdi, 2021c, p. 32). This phenomenon of perceived time/place and project conflation relates to the impact of relationship building between scholars and community partners. Rather than the usual transactional, time-limited, grant-based collaborations that are customary in academic cultures, individuals in successful community partnerships may be more likely to comprehend these relationships holistically—with each project having very little weight compared to the entirety of the important work being performed together during the relationship. Such well-established relationships may muddy the waters for specific project reflection; however, they demonstrate the resolution of the "unnecessary dichotomy" between universities and

communities.

### Membership in Communities of Trust

BFS university fellows expressed confidence in building community with each other—“like-minded scholars” at their university—but desired how-to instruction on building relationships with individuals and communities outside the university. This difference in approaches to relationship building also contributes to the difficulty in resolving ethical tensions in university–community partnerships with varied power dynamics. Exploring the university as a community can inspire academics in the *undoing* process and support the inquiry guiding this rethinking: Can we remake public institutions of higher education through community engagement in the field?

Universities are rarely regarded as communities in this context, though academics are professionally socialized into a larger academic community. McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) definition of *membership* provides a lens for understanding the academic community orientation. “Membership” is defined as “a feeling that one has invested oneself to become a member and therefore has a right to belong” (p. 9). This definition matches the academic experience of investment into this professional orientation and earning the right to membership in the academy, as well as the social status conferred upon this group as society’s experts. Relatedly, BFS university fellows named “ego-checking” as one of the most important insights they gained from the summer institute panels (Mahdi, 2021c).

This context of community membership as an earned right supports our understanding of the paradigm in which academics have been trained, which may influence the way they approach relationship building. Given their socialization to the academic arrangement of time based on benchmarks of learning and achievement, academics may be approaching community relationships using the logic of achievement and earning awards within academia. For example, BFS evaluation results showed that fellows wished for instruction on how to initiate and maintain trusting relationships with community partners. Given the historical exploitation of less powerful communities by universities, the idea of earning the trust of a community perceived to be less powerful seems to be a heavy one. However, the predisposition toward instructions for gain-

ing someone’s trust may be straying from our path of proper ethics in publicly engaged work. An “undoing,” then, must address the fallacy of asking “What must I do to earn the award of membership and trust?” Like informed consent, trust is also an ongoing process.

Examination of the differences between having membership and being “of the community” can facilitate a shift in perspective as members of academic communities explore their positionality in an off-campus partnership. Mahdi’s (2018) case study of the Go-Go cultural community (predominantly localized to the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area) provided evidence that neither the membership construct nor expectations of trust are relevant in all types of communities. Participants in this study rejected the term “membership,” regarding it as an indication of exclusionary attitudes, and they denied any expectation of trust between community members. Qualitative analysis revealed a pattern that Mahdi termed “being of the community.” She defined this construct as embodying “a personal, interactive knowledge and experience of the community such that one is recognizable as a community member” (p. 97). Where “membership” is a feeling one *has*, tied to earning and investment, “of the community” is something a person *is* because the community knows it to be true. When it comes to being of the community, community is as community does, and *we* know who *we* are. Instead of the boundary-regulated, in or out membership model, being of the community operates by levels, with a core community allowing the capacity for both supportive and potential community members.

The focus here is on recognition of shared personal experiences within the community’s common history and culture. Specifically, all are welcome as community if they demonstrate love and support to the core community. It was important for the BFS team to include scholars and local partners who show up in and with communities in Baltimore to support communities’ rights—outside university-based opportunities and funding. In other words, these leaders are recognizable as community members, independent of the university–community arrangement, because of the personal experiences they have shared with others, most notably relationship building and support. Being of the community,

with its deemphasis on trying to earn trust and emphasis on shared experiences with actions of love and support, is another potential path to resolving the unnecessary dichotomy of university and community in these types of partnerships.

### **Conclusion and Takeaways: “We Are the Field”**

Having access to the campus a little more. The university is a resource in itself. . . . I think just having other departments or students with other skills . . . having other experts . . . of the university that can assist and provide either services, skill sets, or equipment. And maybe some of that can be done in the pre-production if we plan it out, just considering some of the needs of the project.—Curtis Eaddy (P2), Southwest Partnership (Mahdi, 2021b)

At the outset of the project, Jackson (P1) and Eaddy (P2) named concrete actions that university-based partners could take to “serve the community” with their organizations. Their asks, as conveyed in the pre-evaluation, were not in the spirit of “You must do this so that we will trust you.” They communicated their goals in the name of service as in, “This is what we do for our communities. You are welcome to contribute.”

In fall 2021 and at the request of representatives from the nonprofit news organization The Real News Network (TRNN), BFS team leaders met with the head of the university’s Special Collections archives to discuss the acquisition of the *To Say Their Own Word* series of films recorded in 1980 with funding from the National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH) orchestrated by Eddie Conway, a Baltimore Black Panther who had been incarcerated at the time. The series consisted of approximately 40 VHS tapes that documented an educational outreach program for people incarcerated in the Maryland Penitentiary. Prisoners came together with outside organizers and academics to discuss salient themes like the prison industrial complex, capitalism, and surveillance. During our meeting back in 2021, Conway, a TRNN producer, established his interest in partnering with university faculty and students to develop programming using the archive. “I just wish there was money to pay us to do this,” said

Conway, lamenting the dearth of funding to support these important, community-led initiatives. Conway’s concern links directly with feedback from Jackson (P1) and Eaddy (P2). We know this work already exists and is ongoing, yet how do we shift our objectives and adjust our resources to offer support for the work?

In February 2022, the BFS project team was awarded an American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Sustaining Public Engagement Grant (made possible through the NEH Sustaining the Humanities through the American Rescue Plan [SHARP] initiative) to support Baltimore Field School (BFS) 2.0: *Undoing & Doing Anew in Public Humanities*. With this funding, we expanded BFS into BFS 2.0 by inviting more Community Fellows—increasing the number from two to eight—to be a part of an extended planning process, offering more financial and institutional support for their ongoing work, and basing our programming modification on our extensive qualitative assessment. As quoted above, Eaddy (P2) also discussed the off-campus communities’ lack of access to campus resources, including equipment, people, and skill sets, which was exacerbated by the virtual format that the COVID-19 crisis necessitated. Eaddy’s (P2) feedback raises a question: Can universities offer the community tangible and equitable access to campus? For the 2022–2023 Community Fellows, we were able to offer university ID cards with all the benefits—library, technology, gym, transportation, and the like—that the institution provides its faculty, staff, and students.

Of note, the institution/university did not remember the revised language on ownership in the contracts, but the individuals in the project team did. This ethos of community ownership from the inaugural BFS contract issue became formalized (following some work by the project team) for BFS 2.0. The project team worked to create contract language that expressed community—not university—ownership of their intellectual property, data, and stories and to share that language publicly and widely.

BFS 2.0 aims to address concerns from our assessment by developing a paradigm of collaborative partnerships with a cohort of eight Community Fellows, supporting their ongoing work in Baltimore, adding staff to the faculty and graduate student university fellows, and continuing the evaluation process from the 2021 BFS project. Both Jackson

(P1) and Eddy (P2) returned as two of the eight 2022–2023 Community Fellows.

Along with more time, space, and university access, we budgeted more compensation for our Community Fellows (\$10,000 per fellow—from \$4,000 in 2021) and doubled the compensation for our project evaluator to \$10,000. The 2023 Community Fellows projects advance social justice issues focused on three core tracks: access to public information and research, food and land justice, and racial equity in Baltimore. Community Fellows include leaders from institutions like local nonprofit news publication the *Baltimore Beat*, food cooperatives like Mera Kitchen Collective, and housing justice projects like Baltimore Renters United.

We met with the Community Fellows throughout a year-long term to build from their expertise and design frameworks of equitable and ethical models for community-centered projects. We implement these frameworks with Showcases in the fall and spring semesters focused on the work of numerous Community Fellows. Showcases also encompass planning the next BFS summer institute, most recently with participation expanding to 11 junior faculty, graduate students, and, for the first time, university staff. Offering BFS as an opportunity to staff represents our growing commitment to institutional equity.

University-based BFS fellows received the same \$3,000 compensation for a planning meeting in spring 2023 and for their participation in the week-long summer institute in July 2023, which was in person and in the field with Jackson (P1) in South Baltimore, Eddy (P2) in West Baltimore, and various Community Fellows throughout the city. We integrated Community Fellows into the research and teaching of our Public Humanities program throughout the year. One of the university BFS fellows (an assistant professor) from 2021 is now the principal investigator for the ACLS SHARP grant, a step that presents a model of passing on the collaborative and shared sense of leadership in sustaining projects. Sustainable projects must be personality proof and collective. All of these choices are intentional and derive from our qualitative evaluation process and are invested in radical transparency on how projects are planned and executed.

We provide these final takeaways from the project and its evaluation and planning for the next stages with the caveat that one of

the most important things we learned is that there is no one right way to perform community-engaged work; however, community partners and the assessment coordinator must be involved in planning and writing the grant. There are certainly unethical and extractive practices to avoid as well as an ethos of inclusion, equity, and community ownership to aspire toward; however, each project has its own context and shifting landscape. In addition, crises must be acknowledged as a central and ongoing part of the iterative process of publicly engaged work between communities and universities.

Here are our early-stage findings:

- The importance of building relationships is at the heart of ethical university and community partnerships, and those relationships begin with individuals and do not necessarily carry over to the institutions and organizations.
- Community partners must be consulted in the writing of the grant as well as the budget.
- As crises unveil, universities must shift objectives and adjust resources to support ongoing work and emergent demands.
- A self-reflexive evaluation and assessment process is essential at every stage of the process, and the evaluator must understand the nature of the project and its intellectual and practical goals. The evaluator should be a principal part of the project team from inception.
- Rethinking institutional time and space within crisis allows community-centered reflection that might begin to cross the boundaries and the limits imposed by neoliberal institutions. Working at the speed of the work means moving with the time and space of Community Fellows and pushing back against a rigid academic notion of semesters and university policies designed for faculty and students, not communities.
- Just like the concept of “the community,” the concept of “the field” is constantly shifting. Any project should start with the project team defining their concepts on their



own terms and in their own words. For us, we expanded from an initial place-based definition to include a human-centered understanding of “the field.”

- Radical transparency can also involve a form of translucency, meaning that the individual level is where connections happen in relationship building, but sometimes the individual should disappear into the collective, into the work (*Baltimore School: Translucency Manifesto*, 2019).
- Finally, we must work to address and undo the harms of the past—such as universities as agents of gentrification and extractive research practices—and ongoing harm. We must realize that failures are often based on attempts to “do good” or “help” and shift not only our intentions but the very structures and reward systems in our institutions.

In “The Creative Process” James Baldwin wrote that the artist “must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides” (J. Baldwin, 1962/1998, p. 670). We came up with many important questions collaborating on the 2021 and 2023 BFS. We took into account the evaluator’s recommendations and designed BFS 2.0 with an extended timeline to enable deeper relationship building, with participants actually doing the work to achieve the partner organizations’ goals, and in continued dialogue with partners. Rethinking institutional time and space should be part of the undoing and doing anew.

This intentionality and transparency/translucency fosters collaboration, trust, and mutual benefit between university and nonuniversity communities to promote a strong and sustainable infrastructure of engagement—one that begins to cross the boundaries and the limits imposed by neoliberal institutions—both inside and outside academia. We must adjust frames and maneuver resources to better respond to ongoing projects and crises.

During the BFS 2.0 Spring Showcase on Wednesday, April 26, 2023, at TRNN—a nonprofit media organization and partner—we featured the To Say Their Own Word archive. This public archive project was a partnership between Community Fellows

Eddie Conway and Cameron Granadino of TRNN and University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) Special Collections. Conway passed away on February 13, 2023. The Spring Showcase became a tribute to Conway. Our fellows along with Conway’s TRNN colleagues, wife Dominique Conway, and close friend Paul Coates, reflected on his lifelong fight for social justice in various communities. In the words of Community Fellow Cameron Granadino, the To Say Their Own Word project is “really about how political prisoners inspire people to organize in the community” (Mahdi, 2023, p. 27). The archive is one small part of the legacy of humanity Conway leaves behind to inform and inspire future generations of organizers.

TRNN published a piece, “Eddie Conway (1946–2023): Remembering the Life and Struggle of a Beloved Comrade and Former Political Prisoner,” which explains that Eddie organized the NEH-funded To Say Their Own Word seminar program in the 1980s while incarcerated in the Maryland Penitentiary as a way to cross-pollinate radical thought inside and outside the prison (TRNN, 2023). Throughout BFS 2.0, the university partnered with TRNN Community Fellows to digitize and archive VHS videos from this monumental program in our Special Collections so the public can engage with these materials for generations to come—freely and without charge. The humanities are public when they serve everyone and no one—meaning they are collective and not about individual credit (King, 2021). As Eddie Conway wrote in his autobiography, published in 2011:

Organizing is my life’s work, and even though I initially balked at becoming a prison organizer, that is where most of my work has been done. Friends and family tell me that I have influenced hundreds of young people, but I don’t know. I simply see the error of this society’s ways up close and feel compelled to do something about it; I have tried my hardest to avoid getting caught up in the cult of the personality that often develops around political prisoners. I have walked the prison yard and seen admiration in the eyes of others, but had to remind myself, as I straightened my posture, that it is about something bigger than me. (Conway & Stevenson, 2011, quoted in TRNN, 2023, para. 8).

Conway called on us all to engage in community organizing in whatever form we can and to embrace our humanity and the humanity of others. “Do your little part. Do whatever you can to help change these conditions. Because we’re moving into a critical period of history, not just for poor and oppressed people, Black people, but for humanity itself,” he explained in 2019 while

celebrating 5 years of freedom. “So you need to engage. Do whatever little bit you can, but you need to do something” (TRNN, 2023, para. 1).

We are the field, and we need to reclaim that time, space, and investment. *The field is us.*



### Author Note

Baltimore Traces has IRB approval. The BFS partners signed partnership agreements, and the project uses Creative Commons agreements to make information publicly available.

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