▸ **WORCESTER COUNTY POETRY ASSOCIATION**

"Mapping Worcester in Poetry offers live and virtual experiences that place people directly into Worcester's formidable and diverse literary landscape and invites them to participate in it. Worcester has an expansive literary landscape and now people can take themselves there, because the project employs the geography of Worcester to tell its story. Never before have there been explicit, concrete, organized ways to learn about Worcester's poets." — Judith Ferrara, *WCPA member, special projects volunteer*

HOW COLLEGE AND COMMUNITY ARE CREATING

a new kind of knowledge

Holy Cross faculty, students and Worcester nonprofits are teaming to explore the history of some of the city's uncharted communities, delivering scholarship, real-world experience and practical impact.

BY MEREDITH FIDROCKI

Crisscrossing Worcester by car and foot as she tracks some of the city's most famed poets, Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, Distinguished Professor of Arts and Humanities, says two stanzas from Stanley Kunitz's "My Mother's Pears" keep bubbling up:

> I summon up all my strength
> to set the pear tree in the ground,
> unwinding its burlap shroud.
>
> It is taller than I. "Make room
> for the roots!" my mother cries,
> "Dig the hole deeper."

In these verses, Kunitz recalls the day he planted a pear tree in his Worcester backyard – and the wisdom of his mother instructing him to set the roots even deeper. Six decades later, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Kunitz discovered the tree still blooming in the backyard of 4 Woodford Street. Each year until his death in 2006, the home's new owners shipped him a box of pears picked from the tree, inspiring the poem.

Sweeney, together with the Worcester County Poetry Association and Holy Cross students, is mapping the history of Worcester poets like Kunitz as one of more than a dozen projects made possible through Scholarship in Action (SIA) – a five-year grant initiative that, since 2018, has united Holy Cross and local community partners in deep collaboration, also setting a high standard of academic excellence through community-engaged scholarship at the College.

Like Kunitz's pear tree, SIA is a modern-day example of how the College is continuing to deepen its roots in the city it has called home since 1843, as it nurtures partnerships with fellow Worcester organizations.

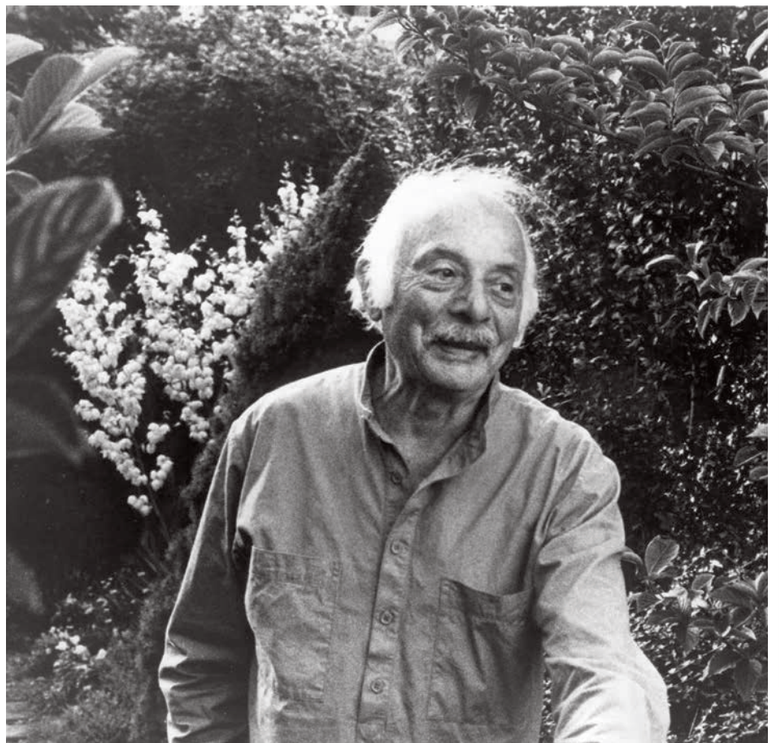
"**A question of power**"

Launched in 2018 through an $800,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, SIA is building on the College's foundation of community engagement through long-term, Worcester-based faculty research, focused on the humanities and social sciences.

Key to the work is that projects are proposed jointly – by Holy Cross faculty

(opposite) Sweeney and students in her fall 2022 Poetry & Poetics class stop for aphoto in front of a mural of the late Worcester poet Stanley Kunitz at Polar Park; Kunitz; the poet's former home at 4 Woodford Street, a location that features in his work.

JAMES LAUGHLIN



(above, left to right) Some of the many faculty involved in SIA over the past five years include Mary Conley, director and associate professor of history; Cynthia Stone, professor of Spanish; Justin Poché, associate professor of history; Tsitsi Masvawure, professor of practice in health studies; and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, Distinguished Professor of Arts and Humanities.

and community partners. "Building something together is different than getting someone's input," says Mary Conley, associate professor of history and director of SIA. "This kind of research is based on reciprocity and relationships."

The effort is rooted in Ignatian-based thinking about the importance of place, and in the College's mission to add value to the world through liberal arts education. At its core, Conley says, SIA is led by questions: What knowledge does our community say is needed? Who produces that knowledge? Who asks the questions?

"Fundamentally, it's a question of power – by re-centering equity and community stakeholders throughout the process of knowledge production, we become scholars with others," she notes.

The SIA projects require dedication from faculty and students, who are involved in every step, and the work is designed around a partner's needs, not the College's schedule. This can mean unexpected pivots and year-round commitments. Notes Conley, "If the community doesn't take summers off, how can we?"

Community partners to date include science and nature museum the EcoTarium, Refugee Artisans of Worcester, Worcester Refugee Assistance Project, Burncoat Middle School, Family Health Center of Worcester and Music Worcester, among others.

As the Mellon grant-funded period ends with the 2022-2023 academic year, SIA is entering a new phase at the College. Moving forward, the initiative, which collaborates closely with Holy Cross' J.D. Power Center for Liberal Arts in the World and the Donelan Office of Community-Based Learning, plans to offer faculty even more flexibility, offering various ways for them to scale their work with community partners through one-year seed grants, two-year SIA grants and a longer harvest grant.

"SIA is an intentional way of creating knowledge by doing work that matters within the community and is informed by what you see on the ground," Conley says. Connecting back to Kunitz's pear tree, she notes, "the choices we make now will nurture projects that will bear fruit for years to come."

• • • • •

Mapping Worcester in Poetry
Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, Distinguished Professor of Arts and Humanities + ***Worcester County Poetry Association***
Years ago, Worcester poet Mary Fell came to Holy Cross to give a reading. One of Fell's poems was about the Denholm building, a former thriving department store and longtime staple of downtown Worcester that later housed offices. "I had a student from Worcester in my class, and the idea that somebody had written a poem about this building, where her mother worked, meant so much to her," Sweeney says. "That was part of the impetus for this project, because I saw how much it mattered to her.

"People often think of poetry as something that's alien and hard to understand," she continues. "I want people to think of poetry as something that not only expresses feelings, but can be about places they walk by every day. And I want them to know that places they feel are theirs may already be celebrated in poetry."

Sweeney and her partners at the Worcester County Poetry Association (WCPA), one of the longest-running nonprofit poetry organizations in the country, are now mapping sites across the city connected to nationally recognized poets from Worcester, including Stanley Kunitz, Elizabeth Bishop, Charles Olson, Frank O'Hara, Etheridge Knight, Mary Fell and Christopher Gilbert.

Once awarded the SIA grant, Sweeney asked for input from local stakeholders, like the Stanley Kunitz Boyhood Home, The Worcester Review literary and art journal, Preservation Worcester, the Worcester Historical Museum and Main

IDEA, which provides free arts programming to Worcester youth. "I was amazed at how excited everybody was about the project," she says. "Everybody wanted to get involved and came up with ideas."

The project is building on WCPA's existing research to produce an interactive website, self-guided tours, a special issue of The Worcester Review and a Worcester Historical Museum exhibit. The project will also nurture new poems about the city, through workshops and poetry contests.

In their work with the project, SIA student scholars have contributed in myriad ways: A recent Holy Cross alum drew detailed portraits of the seven featured poets; a student research associate helped Sweeney meticulously document every sidewalk, street sign and turn for the self-guided driving and walking tours; and students in her classes wrote essays analyzing poems in the context of their Worcester settings.

(above left) Katie Knippler '22, a student research associate in Sweeney's Mapping Worcester in Poetry, reads a poem during an annual event held at the grave of poet Elizabeth Bishop at Hope Cemetery in February 2022. *(above right)* Student members of Masvawure's lab meet with Martha Akstin, former director of prevention and screening at AIDS Project Worcester.

▲ AIDS PROJECT WORCESTER
"This will be a critical collection of personal stories from one of the oldest AIDS service organizations in the country. It wouldn't be possible without the generous support of Holy Cross. Professor Tsitsi Masvawure has a vision for this project and manages to bring it back so the students not only contribute, but also learn important research tools and processes. She makes sure all of us have a voice and feel part of the project." — Martha Akstin, *former APW director of prevention and screening*

In February 2023, the project hosted an annual outdoor reading of poems by Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) at her gravesite in Worcester's Hope Cemetery. "More than a dozen people, including my colleague, Oliver de la Paz [associate professor of English], who had just been named Worcester's poet laureate, came out in the cold for an hour to read and celebrate poetry," Sweeney says.

A year prior, a photographer from the Worcester Telegram & Gazette captured the graveside reading event in a photo essay that ran on the front page. "Several people said to me, 'This is the first time poetry has ever been on the front page of the T&G,'" Sweeney notes. In addition to mapping the sites of poems already set in Worcester, Sweeney and WCPA are holding readings, workshops and a one-time contest to nurture new poems about public places in the city.

• • • • •

Three Decades of AIDS Activism: Telling the Story of AIDS Project Worcester
Tsitsi Masvawure, professor of practice in health studies + ***AIDS Project Worcester***
Partway into their SIA project, "Three Decades of AIDS Activism: Telling the Story of AIDS Project Worcester," Masvawure's partners at AIDS Project Worcester (APW) floated the idea of switching a portion of the grant's direct funding focus from expanding APW's peer support groups to growing its transgender health program, which helps connect transgender people with specialized health care providers and services. The answer was an easy "yes," Masvawure says.

"You don't see many examples where a grant already in progress can respond to what's needed right now," says Masvawure, a medical anthropologist who has studied HIV/AIDS in communities across the world. "I said, 'If you feel this is an urgent priority, then that's what this SIA grant is supposed to do. It's very flexible.' You can see the disbelief sometimes."

From its beginnings in the 1980s running an HIV/AIDS support group out of a local church, APW has become a leader in comprehensive HIV/AIDS

services for individuals and families in Central Massachusetts, meeting emerging public health issues through education, advocacy and a range of service programs, including testing and counseling, housing support, needle exchange and Narcan training and distribution.

"APW does groundbreaking work and has an amazing story of longevity," says Masvawure, who also serves on its board. "Their story must be told."

In addition to providing direct funding where APW needs it most, the grant is fueling an ongoing, expansive storytelling initiative. Masvawure, partners at APW and a dedicated team of students are documenting APW's history and gathering personal impact stories through interviews with current and former APW employees and board members and community stakeholders, like the Department of Public Health, as well as a cross-section of APW clients, including individuals living with HIV, people who inject drugs or used to inject drugs, and those receiving housing support. Ultimately, they will collect roughly 100 stories to be shared through print, podcasts and online exhibits. Masvawure's close collaborator on the project is Martha Akstin, former APW director of prevention and screening.

▲ LATINO HISTORY PROJECT OF WORCESTER

"This work is transforming the way the community understands the experience and contributions of Latinos in Worcester and will give access to anyone who wants to learn more. This project is unique, as most projects like this are not able to sustain themselves throughout the years. But, with the continuity of scholars who help students make sense of Latinos in Worcester, along with the community group and the Worcester Historical Museum, we have the foundation for a successful collaboration. We are so excited about the contribution and impact to the future generations." — Hilda Ramirez, *founder and member of Latino History Project Steering Committee*

"I know what I would ask as an HIV researcher, but she knows the questions to ask as someone who has worked on HIV in Worcester, with this organization," Masvawure says.

Students look to Akstin, a former journalist, not only for interviewing skills, but also as an expert, Masvawure says. They feel accountable to the community and have developed deep connections to the organization well beyond their project responsibilities, she adds.

In February 2023, APW needed food servers for a National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day event. "It was a freezing cold Friday night, and one of the SIA students took an Uber there to help," Masvawure says. "It just shows their level of commitment."

The connection between the professor, students and community partner is a strength, she adds, noting that psychology major Arianna Arguedas '23 and health studies majors Tianci Guan '23, Maggie Smith '24 and Mary Conan's '23 were critical to the endeavor's success: "I honestly couldn't have done this project without these students," Masvawure says.

As they document APW's story, Masvawure and her team are also producing research that reflects lessons learned from the stories they've gathered. In 2020, the International AIDS Conference accepted an abstract, submitted by Masvawure and co-authors from APW and Clark University, that detailed how APW evolved into a central hub for health care services. It was a big moment, Masvawure says, not only because the acceptance rate is so low, but also because the conference offers a global stage to share useful insights with other HIV/AIDS community organizations. The SIA grant is furthering the team's capacity to generate this type of research.

"But I'm most proud of showing a community partner that the College cares and is willing to invest in them," Masvawure reflects.

(above) Members of the Latino History Project of Worcester participate in a recent Discovery Day, during which they can bring in materials, record oral history interviews and share personal stories that illuminate the larger history of Latinos in the city. Items brought in, ranging from newspaper clippings to photos and scrapbooks, are cataloged to become part of the exhibit.

(above left) Susan Rodgers, professor emerita of anthropology and Distinguished Professor Emerita, Ethics and Society, stands at the 2020 Worcester Center for Crafts exhibit, curated by Rodgers and her students, featuring the work of the city's refugee artisans. Rodgers' SIA project centered in part around how refugee artisans make new homes and lives in Worcester after fleeing extreme violence in their home countries. *(above right)* Stephanie Yuhl, W. Arthur Garrity, Sr. Professor in Human Nature, Ethics and Society, and students pictured at the 2019 Worcester Historical Museum exhibit, "LBGTQ+ Worcester — For the Record," part of her SIA project devoted to developing a digital historical archive, oral history project and artifact collection of LGBTQ+-related materials in Worcester County.

"And creating these opportunities for meaningful relationships between students and community partners ... it gives me hope."

• • • • •

Worcester Through a Latino Lens
Cynthia Stone, professor of Spanish & ***Justin Poché,*** associate professor of history + ***Latino History Project of Worcester & Worcester Historical Museum***
For their SIA project centered on affirming community agency and voice through the Latino History Project of Worcester, Stone and Poché knew they wanted to make space for Latino community members to tell their stories in their own way. "Sometimes, you'll see interviews that feel almost like an oral CV, and we didn't want that," Stone says. "We usually start with a life interview, where we ask about very early, formative experiences so you understand where that person is coming from."

"The open-endedness is so important," Poché says. "As specialists, we can sometimes come in with very specific ideas of what matters, as opposed to letting community voices tell us what matters. We need to approach it as a learner."

The Latino History Project formed in 2014 following ongoing conversations among community leaders about the importance of documenting and celebrating Worcester's Latino history and growing population. "It's such an important part of Worcester's history, and yet the little that had been documented wasn't even from the point of view of the community," Stone says. She and Rosa Carrasquillo, professor of history, were the first scholars to join the initiative; Poché joined the project in 2018.

Since 2019, the SIA grant has supported the project's work, helping tell previously "unheard stories" of Latino institutions, culture and daily life in Worcester through artifacts and oral histories from an array of Latino voices – educators, artists, political leaders, business owners, activists and more.

"When interviewing people whose voices have not traditionally been heard, it's so important that our connections to them are through members of the community," Stone says. "There's a lot of distrust for very clear, historically obvious reasons. This work is all about relationship-building, and that's why it takes so much time.

"We've had a lot of students who've participated in the oral interviewing process, both heritage and non-heritage Spanish speakers," she continues. "It has helped students reflect on their own family histories, and we've actually had some students decide to interview relatives about their experiences."

The project is producing a bilingual catalog, website and oral history archive, as well as public previews leading up to a comprehensive "Somos Worcester" exhibit to be held at the Worcester Historical Museum in 2024.

"SIA is an indication that there's momentum building for recognizing this kind of community-engaged scholarship and co-authorship as valid areas of scholarship," says Stone, who sees the program as an important reflection of the College's institutional values.

"History is not just built on the written records of what people said and did," Poché adds. "Good histories capture the feel, the smell, the taste, the sound – and above all – the significance of places to the community. If we don't consider homes, kitchens, altares, neighborhood streets and botánicas as sacred and embodying meaning, then we're missing a lot. A project driven by Holy Cross' mission needs to embrace these lived spaces at the center of the story." ■