


CASE STUDY

# Creating Space: Methods for Intergenerational Engagement

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## Abstract

This article explores three projects that responded to community needs using a variety of tools and strategies for community empowerment. The first project grew out of a course that explored how Yonkers' local history intertwined with the metanarrative of American history and policy decisions. The students created a podcast series with oral history interviews from community members, focusing on a range of topics, including climate justice, politics, gentrification, education, and shopping malls. The second project emerged as a result of a public lecture series hosted by the library. Highlighting the work of local artists, I curated an art exhibition that explored uniting the community through quilting, narratives of immigration, and the growing impact of gentrification in the downtown area. The final project sought to tell and archive stories from the community, resulting in a digital oral history archive focusing on the African American experience.

**Keywords:** public humanities; Yonkers; podcasts; public art; curation; digital preservation; oral history

In 2019, the Mellon Foundation posed the question: “If your college went away tomorrow, what would your neighbors say?”<sup>1</sup> The reality for Sarah Lawrence College is that many of its neighbors felt detached, neglected, and ignored. Founded in 1926, Sarah Lawrence College is a small liberal arts college located within the city of Yonkers. It borders the Village of Bronxville and lies north of New York City.<sup>2</sup> With the support of a \$1.2 million grant from the Mellon Foundation, Sarah Lawrence College sought to change its relationship with the community by launching a new hybrid program where faculty instruct courses at the college and embed academic fellows as staff at partner organizations. In 2020, I arrived in Yonkers, New York, as the first hired Public Humanities Fellow with an appointment in the History Department and as a staff member at the Yonkers Public Library. The task at hand was simple yet daunting: over the course of three years, create programming and course offerings that engaged residents to build connections between the college and the community.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation was established in 1969 to strengthen, promote, and defend the arts and humanities as essential to democratic societies. For more information, see “[History and Founders of the Mellon Foundation](#)” n.d. The question posed by the Mellon Foundation is further discussed in, “A Celebration of Community: The Mellon Grant for Civic Engagement” 2024.

<sup>2</sup> *About Sarah Lawrence* n.d.

<sup>3</sup> Excerpts from this article first appeared in a blog post I wrote in 2022 (Soljour 2022).

I was based at the Riverfront Library, the largest branch within the Yonkers Public Library system, located in the multi-ethnic and economically bifurcated downtown area of southwest Yonkers. Residents of the neighborhood form long-standing African American and Latinx communities, while recent transplants from New York City are focal to redevelopment plans. The city's urban renewal includes waterfront condominiums, new shopping areas, restaurants, and commercial offices. For many long-time residents, these revitalization efforts increase home insecurity, gentrification, and, in some cases, rates of homelessness. These communal concerns were compounded by COVID-19. The pandemic unearthed the inequality of health outcomes and economic resources for residents from the area, who reported higher case numbers, hospitalizations, and deaths than other neighborhoods in Yonkers and Westchester County.<sup>4</sup> Amidst the uneasy quiet of COVID-19 restrictions, I spent the first few months of the fellowship immersed in the Local History Room at the library. The halls were empty, patrons were not permitted inside the building, and masks hid the faces of my future colleagues, neighbors, and friends. As I plowed through monographs about Yonkers' history, life in Westchester County, and the greater New York state, I realized there were many stories untold.

My first effort to uncover these hidden histories began with an upper-division online course titled "The City of Yonkers: Histories of Change, Continuity and Community." As an interdisciplinary scholar, my research focuses on cultural and socio-political change within diasporic communities, along with a commitment to publicly engaged humanities projects that bring underexamined stories from the margins of the historical record to light. When tasked with designing a completely new online course, I established course objectives that prioritized experiential learning, emphasized local history, and encouraged collaboration with the Yonkers Public Library to support archival research. I selected course readings that explored the experiences of various ethnic communities, significant moments of social, economic, political, and cultural upheaval, as well as the local history of Yonkers and its role in state and national narratives.<sup>5</sup>

The course charted the evolution of Yonkers during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Students learned that the city weathered socioeconomic, political, and cultural movements that mirrored national developments. A stronghold for industry, factories within Yonkers were vital to World War I and II production. However, in the wake of the World Wars, the city became a site of mass deindustrialization as companies looked westward and beyond for more cost-effective options. Following this economic wane, Yonkers public housing became the centerpiece of a United States Supreme Court case that linked desegregation to education and community.<sup>6</sup> Following a nearly thirty-year battle, the case forever changed the landscape and composition of the city by mandating changes to school busing, the creation of magnet schools, and student transfer programs, in addition to establishing a Fair Housing office and the construction of more affordable housing units.<sup>7</sup>

To introduce students to the historical and political context of Yonkers, I developed three course assignments that incorporated methodologies from public and digital humanities. The first assignment required students to engage with recently digitized newspapers available through the Yonkers Public Library archive to write an analytical paper exploring

<sup>4</sup> Levine 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Texts from the course included but were not limited to: Belkin and Simon 2015; Duffy 2014; Haynes 2008; Kelley 2004; Mosterman 2021; Simon 1993; Vaccarino 2021; Yonkers Historical Society and Weigold 2014.

<sup>6</sup> "Case: United States v. Yonkers" n.d.

<sup>7</sup> Hochschild and Danielson 2004; Lee 2024.

socio-cultural upheaval during the interwar period.<sup>8</sup> Students received training from the library's archivist on how to access, navigate, and research materials relevant to their chosen topics. Additionally, class time and individual appointments were dedicated to supporting the analysis and interpretation of these primary sources.

The final two assignments tasked students with completing an oral history project that resulted in the production of a 15-minute podcast episode, accompanied by a reflection paper. The decision to create a class podcast was a pedagogical response to the transition to online learning during the pandemic. I utilized the podcast project as an opportunity to train students in oral history methodologies and audio editing skill development. More significantly, the podcasts provided a platform for students to share their newfound knowledge with the wider Yonkers community.<sup>9</sup> The project required students to establish a rapport with community members through sustained conversations, analysis of the lived experience in conjunction with local historical research, and the development of a distinctive narrative voice. By leveraging the power of social media, students joined Facebook groups dedicated to Yonkers's history and reached out to local activists via Instagram, in addition to reconnecting with guest speakers from the course to request interviews. My goal for this project was to disrupt patterns of isolation experienced by both students and the community due to COVID-19 precautions while also enhancing intergenerational exchanges of knowledge and experiences.<sup>10</sup> Most importantly, the discussions and research necessary to complete the assignment aimed to shift students' perspectives of themselves as "outsiders" while also changing community perceptions of students as detached from the everyday events that shape life in the city. Throughout the semester, students received Research, Ethics, and Compliance training to learn the proper protocols for conducting human subject research. To facilitate the sharing of their findings with the broader community, I led sessions on audio editing, scriptwriting, and narration for podcast development.

The project culminated in an 11-episode series titled "Histories of Change, Continuity and Community," borrowing from the course name. Each episode explored diverse topics, including the impact of government aid programs on mothers of color, the role of public parks, and historical examples of political corruption. Highlights of the series include an interview with renowned Civil Rights attorney, Michael Sussman, who reexamined his role in one of the last desegregation cases in the country, as well as the impact of gentrification in Yonkers.<sup>11</sup> Another notable segment featured a discussion with five Yonkers residents about the evolution of Cross County Shopping Center from 1954 to the present.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, an interview with Lucy Moreno-Casanova, Project Coordinator at Greyston Foundation, and Victor Medina, Youth Program Manager at Groundwork Hudson Valley, underscored efforts to combat climate change and food insecurity for marginalized citizens in Yonkers by creating community gardens.<sup>13</sup> At the conclusion of the course, we hosted a virtual listening party attended by the interviewees, staff from the Yonkers Public Library staff, and guest

<sup>8</sup> "The Yonkers News Archive is a digital archive of Yonkers and Westchester newspapers, including the *Yonkers Herald Statesman*. It contains over 2.8 million pages of digitized, searchable newsprint ranging from 1857 to 1998," from "Yonkers News Archive" n.d.

<sup>9</sup> The need to innovate as an instructor during the COVID-19 pandemic has been broadly discussed in popular media and writing. The use of digital humanities to support student learning during the pandemic has been further analyzed in several case studies, such as Gunderson and Cumming 2022; Hall and Jones 2021; Howard-Sukhil, Wallace, and Chakrabarti 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Ehlman, Ligon, and Moriello 2014; Moriello, Ligon, and Ehlman n.d.

<sup>11</sup> Sanchez 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Ledoux 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Schreer 2021.

speakers. After each episode was played, audience participants provided constructive feedback.

By the end of the semester, students who initially believed that Bronxville was “safe” and Yonkers was “dangerous” left transformed. They gained a better understanding of the forces that shaped the city and developed relationships with community leaders, activists, and artists. Several students continued their research and engagement with local organizations beyond the scope of the class, including securing positions as interns and volunteers at the Yonkers Public Library, Groundwork Hudson Valley, and Greyston Foundation. Others suggested that the elements of the course be repurposed into a freshman seminar that would help demystify stereotypes about Yonkers and welcome students as members of a new community. To encourage further engagement with the public, the students and I created a reading list to accompany each podcast episode. The reading list joins the final versions of the episodes and their individual blog posts, which are all housed in the Yonkers Public Library digital archives.<sup>14</sup>

As the world returned to a “new normal,” I was drawn to expand the community-centered projects of my first year to more public-facing programming. In collaboration with library staff, we hosted a monthly virtual lecture series exploring the rich cultural history of Yonkers. Sarah Lawrence College faculty and community partners were recruited to offer lectures on topics ranging from the Westchester African American Heritage Trail to Race and the Environment, and readings during National Poetry Month. The most successful and well-attended lecture, “Public Art in Yonkers,” showcased a panel of local artists. To bridge the vibrant public art movement in Yonkers with Sarah Lawrence College’s legacy as a historic site for artistic creation, I curated the exhibition *Rooted: A Community Archive Project*. Drawing from the rich history of participatory art, the exhibition spotlighted community projects led by artists with expertise in quilting, photography, and mosaics.<sup>15</sup> Each initiative was thoughtfully designed to engage different segments of the Yonkers community and was completed in public spaces during or in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The exhibit displayed work by artists Evan Bishop, Katori Walker, Haifa Bint-Kadi, and Sola Olosunde. While the first three artists were Yonkers-based, the archive project expanded notions of community by including the photography of Sola Olosunde, a Brooklyn-based photographer known for his authentic portrayal of urban life in New York City. Sola led a summer workshop with local Yonkers teens and Sarah Lawrence students. Participants learned to master angles, lighting, and other visual techniques for capturing and later editing their photos (Figure 1).<sup>16</sup>

After this training, workshop participants canvassed the downtown area, capturing images of the rapidly gentrifying waterfront. Their collaborative work was presented in the exhibition. To accompany the images, students scoured the Yonkers Public Library digital archives to chart the evolution of the downtown area using maps, newspaper clippings, photographs, and census data from the late 1800s to the present. These archival materials were arranged underneath the photos they took (Figure 2).

<sup>14</sup> “Yonkers Public Library Archive” n.d.

<sup>15</sup> Throughout history, participatory art has taken many forms in order to highlight untold stories, gather community members to celebrate, memorialize or reflect on changes in society, and respond to changing socio-political contexts. See Brennan 2019; Hein 1996; McNally 2024.

<sup>16</sup> This type of training and engagement mirrors other community photography projects, such as Fairey 2018; PhotoVoice 2009; Purcell 2009.





**Figure 1.** Pictured: Sola Olosunde leading a photography workshop with Yonkers teens and Sarah Lawrence Students on August 8, 2021. Photo courtesy of the author.

The *Rooted* project was a multi-layered installation exploring identity, community, and history within Yonkers and the greater New York State. It was on display at Sarah Lawrence College's Esther Raushenbush Library gallery from November 2021 to January 2022. The exhibit included a variety of media organized around themes of collaboration and storytelling, highlighting the synergy between movement and culture. A QR code linked to the soundtrack playing interviews, music, and other sounds. At the opening reception, members of the Yonkers and Westchester community joined Sarah Lawrence students, faculty, and staff to engage with the artists about their work and its relevance in both public and private spaces. New York State Assemblyman Nader Sayegh presented each artist with a citation honoring their contributions to the local community. Overall, the exhibition and reception



**Figure 2.** Pictured: Photographs from Sola's workshop accompanied by archival materials below. Photo courtesy of the author.

revitalized an underutilized campus space, fostering connections with a community that often felt disconnected from the college environment (Figure 3).

To raise awareness about the exhibition, the artists and I contacted schools, public art organizations, government offices, newsletters, local media outlets, and neighborhood organizations. Our campaign aimed to encourage as many community members as possible to experience the exhibit and visit the campus. I heard from many patrons that they felt the campus was often perceived as “closed” and “not welcoming” to the community. To help bridge the gap between these sentiments and Sarah Lawrence’s willingness to be a better member of the community, I selected artists who were firmly *rooted* in Yonkers. I first met





**Figure 3.** Pictured: Sola Olosunde, Haifa Bint-Kadi, Evan Bishop, Katori Walker, and Kishauna Soljour on November 5, 2021, at the opening reception. Photo courtesy of Sarah Lawrence College.

Evan Bishop and Katori Walker at a community quilt project pop-up where they encouraged participants to create their own 10 × 10 swatches based on the themes of peace, love, family, and community. Beginning in 2018, Evan and Katori embarked on a mission to create the largest community art project in the history of Yonkers. They partnered with 40 local businesses and organizations to host “pop-up creation stations” throughout Yonkers, including Manor Bagels, Warburton Galleries, and Yonkers Public Library. In total, they engaged over 1,200 participants in creating art using pencils, paint, markers, and other materials. Inspired by the 1985 AIDS Memorial Quilt, Evan and Katori displayed segments of the quilt throughout the city during the COVID-19 pandemic as a reminder that, despite social distancing and the loss of loved ones, the community remained connected.<sup>17</sup> By exhibiting the quilt project at Sarah Lawrence College, we promoted the recognition of the institution as an extension of this resilient community (Figure 4).

I heard of Haifa Bint-Kadi through city lore. She is a celebrated artist whom Yonkers remembers due to her efforts to beautify the city. In 2016, she was commissioned to restore the mosaics in Untermyer Park and Gardens. More recently, Haifa took to the streets of Yonkers to repair long-standing cracks in the sidewalks. Using weather-proof mosaic tiles, she arranged intricate patterns with help from local community members to restore these public eyesores.<sup>18</sup> Recovering these fragments of mosaic from destruction, Haifa reminded

<sup>17</sup> Within African American culture, quilting is an art form traditionally used in storytelling and as a form of community as well as economic empowerment. For more about this tradition and its participatory uses, see Benberry 1992; Mazloomi 2020; Scheper-Hughes 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Haifa’s community-centric approach to fixing neglected sidewalks fits within a longer history of artists’ approaches that support the public good. National and international case studies include Gerstenblatt, Shanti, and Frisk 2022; Lavrinec 2014; Reynolds 2018.



**Figure 4.** Pictured: Katori Walker showing community members the complete quilt in front of a map of Yonkers where the pop-up swatch programs occurred. Photo courtesy of the author.

me that we can all contribute to celebrating the beauty of our community in unexpected ways. Her artwork within the show explored the colonization of space, radical dislocation, and displacement (Figure 5).

By promoting the publicly engaged artwork of Evan Bishop, Katori Walker, and Haifa Bint-Kadi, along with the photography of Sola Olosunde, I aimed for the public to see themselves reflected in the works. I wanted to demonstrate that art can be both collaborative and reflective of our life experiences. Literally rooting Sarah Lawrence into the fabric of the community, we illustrated the hopes, dreams, and goals of the public on the college's walls. This initiative sparked conversations among groups that traditionally did not interact with each other. By uniting these experiences and aspirations for the future, I believe that this project signified a new chapter in reintroducing Sarah Lawrence College to Yonkers (Figure 6).

As I listened and learned about Yonkers from various perspectives, I realized that these community voices needed to be preserved. This led me to develop another collaborative venture: *The African American Oral History Project*. I partnered with a second branch of the Yonkers Public Library that has an audio recording studio and worked alongside librarian Michael Walsh to invite participants. We collected stories through extensive interviews and photo documentation. The audio files are stored in the Yonkers Public Library digital archive, and the interviews are available for streaming on YouTube.

Highlights from the project include an interview with former Black Panther Party member Dale Roscoe, who discussed intergenerational activism and proposed a workshop at Sarah





**Figure 5.** Pictured: One of the sidewalk cracks repaired by Haifa Bint-Kadi using mosaic tiles. Photo courtesy of ArtandOddPlaces.<sup>19</sup>

Lawrence College to train student leaders.<sup>20</sup> Another interview focused on the life and work of award-winning sculptor Vinnie Bagwell. Her artistry emphasizes the contributions of African Americans to history.<sup>21</sup> Bagwell's most recent commission, "Victory Beyond Sims," will replace the statue of Dr. J. Marion Sims, which was removed from Central Park in New York City.<sup>22</sup> The interview with Bagwell was complemented by a display at the Riverfront Library that showcased five life-size monuments belonging to the Enslaved Africans' Rain Garden. These statues honor the legacy of the enslaved people who labored at Philipse Manor Hall, a historic site located just 300 feet from the library. This site was home to four generations of the Philipse family, who first arrived in Yonkers as Loyalists during the American Revolutionary War. A third interview featured local educator, genealogist, and Sarah Lawrence College alumnus Dennis Richmond, who traced his family roots from the 1770s to the present. His research was later detailed in a *New York Times* article.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Richmond led a genealogy workshop co-sponsored by the library and the Yonkers Historical Society (Figure 7).

Reflecting on my experience as a Public Humanities fellow, I am empowered to continue the work of bridging the gap between academia and the public. I began the fellowship in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic by responding to a variety of social needs ranging from:

<sup>19</sup> "Haifa Bint Kadi" 2024.

<sup>20</sup> "Oral History Interview with Dale Rascoe" 2021.

<sup>21</sup> "Oral History Interview with Vinnie Bagwell" 2021.

<sup>22</sup> "Artist Vinnie Bagwell Will Design 'Beyond Sims' Monument in East Harlem" 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Leland 2021.



**Figure 6.** A screenshot of NBC New York's Lynda Baquero's interview with *Rooted* artists and myself discussing the exhibition. This segment aired on December 8, 2021.



**Figure 7.** Pictured: Dennis Richmond's great grandparents, John Sherman Merritt and Leila Bell Robinson, in 1909. Image courtesy of the *Yonkers Public Library Archive*.

changes to the built environment, lack of affordable housing, inequitable educational access and quality, and loneliness. As I forged connections between the Yonkers Public Library, Sarah Lawrence College, students, faculty, community partners, and citizens, these relationships broke down barriers and challenged preconceived notions about what community members could contribute to educational spaces. In an effort to combat the stultifying effects of economic, health, and social disparities, I worked with a broad network of individuals to create programming and projects that would generate solutions and instill a belief within participants that we can all be agents of change. These cumulative programs have changed the way students define and engage with the Yonkers community, resulting in an increasing number of students applying for the Community Leadership Intern Program and continued interest in local history courses. And, in turn, the Yonkers community is represented in opportunities provided at Sarah Lawrence College. Through curation, public programming, and digital preservation, I worked to honor the diversity within Yonkers' communities while creating space for marginalized community members to voice their experiences and work in collaboration with public and private organizations to reduce barriers to access. This engagement continues to promote inclusivity by providing a space for Sarah Lawrence students, faculty, and staff to learn from one another and share their perspectives. The Mellon grant has strengthened the connection between the college and the broader community by sustaining interactions in the form of engaged research, dialogue, and collaborative projects.

As the first Public Humanities Fellow, I acted as a bridge between Sarah Lawrence and the communities that previously felt disconnected from the college. I earned the trust of local citizens by listening to and addressing their needs, creating opportunities to enhance communication between different generations, and highlighting the talent that has always existed in Yonkers but was often overlooked. Although I transitioned from the fellowship to accept a position as Assistant Professor of Public Humanities at San Diego State University, I take pride in the fact that the initiatives I started continue to thrive. After my departure, the Yonkers Public Library secured additional grant funding, and Sarah Lawrence College appointed a new Public Humanities Fellow, Benjamin Zander, who is actively leading initiatives in both spaces. Finally, with the generous support of the Endeavor Foundation, the college will maintain its presence in the community through Endeavor Public Engagement Fellows, who will teach part-time at the College while also working within local organizations.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "A Celebration of Community: The Mellon Grant for Civic Engagement" 2024.



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