

PEMBROKE CENTER

Associates Newsletter

Renowned black feminist theorist Hortense J. Spillers gives her papers to the Pembroke Center Archives

Normally, when the Pembroke Center Archives announces that a new collection is open for research, requests to use them stream in over time. In November 2019, when the Pembroke Center announced that the papers of Hortense J. Spillers, one of the most significant black feminist scholars of the late 20th century, were available, the archives staff faced an immediate flood of inquiries from all over the world.

“We were inundated,” said Mary Murphy, the Nancy L. Buc ’65 Pembroke Center Archivist. “There was a huge response just to the announcement that the collection was available and at Brown.”

Members of the public, professors from Brown and across the country, researchers in Hungary and South Africa, and postdoctoral fellows,

graduate students, and undergraduates asked to work with the papers of Spillers, who is the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Professor of English at Vanderbilt University.

Social media posts about the Spillers papers went viral, and researchers appeared at the John Hay Library asking for the Spillers papers, Murphy said, some simply presenting the Twitter thread at the front desk. Murphy and Amanda M. Knox, the Pembroke Center assistant archivist, began fielding research requests before they had a chance to transfer the collection to the John Hay Library, where Pembroke Center Archive collections are

normally housed, so they reorganized their office to make space for visiting researchers. What accounts for the intense interest in the papers of Spillers?

“Hortense J. Spillers has been a foundational figure and a critical voice in feminist theory, as well as American, African American, and Caribbean literary, historical, cultural, and philosophical

Continued on page 4



Photos, unpublished writing, diaries, rare print materials, and scholarly drafts are among the items in Spillers' collection, which spans 1966-1995.

PHOTO CREDIT: THE PEMBROKE CENTER ARCHIVES

differences: A Journal of Cultural Studies celebrates 30th anniversary, wins prize

differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies, one of the leading journals of feminist criticism in the Anglophone world, is celebrating its 30th anniversary. The journal, which is supported by and located within the Pembroke Center, was co-founded in 1989 by Elizabeth Weed, then-associate director of the Pembroke Center, and the late scholar of French literature and feminist theorist Naomi Schor. Now edited by Weed and Ellen Rooney, the Royce

Family Professor of Teaching Excellence and Professor of English and Modern Culture and Media, and overseen by Managing Editor and Senior Lecturer in Gender and Sexuality Studies Denise Davis, the journal highlights theoretical debates across the disciplines that address the ways concepts and categories of difference—notably but not exclusively gender—operate within culture.

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differences

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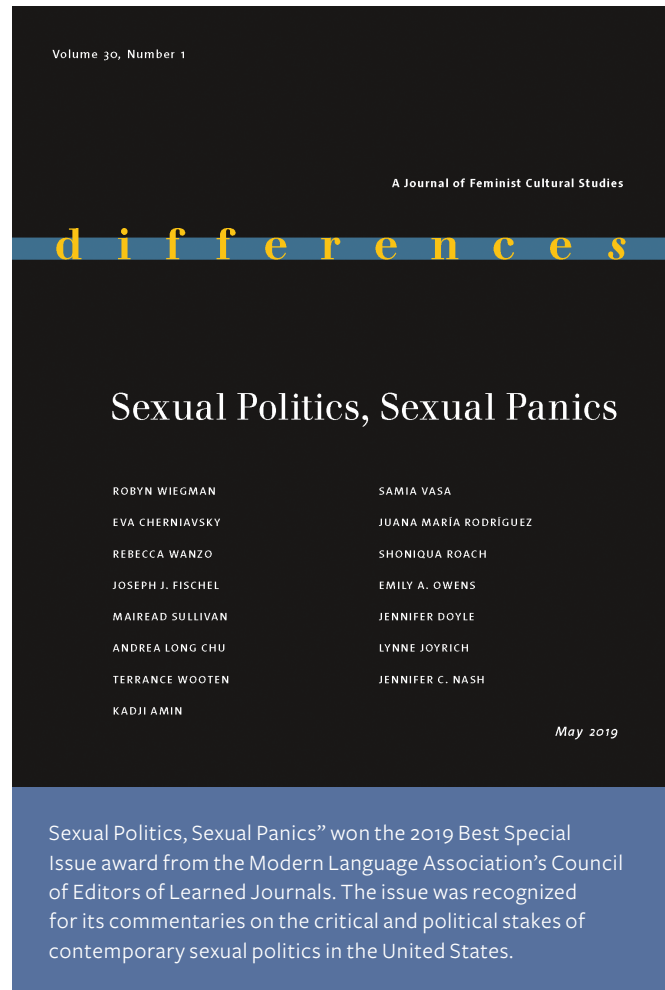
The issue “Sexual Politics, Sexual Panics” won the 2019 Best Special Issue award from the Modern Language Association’s Council of Editors of Learned Journals. As Pembroke Center Director Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg points out, the journal connects the many parts of the Center’s intellectual mission: elevating the work of Center scholars who contribute to it, deepening public discourse about issues at the heart of the study of difference, and identifying theorists and critics whose papers would make meaningful contributions to the Pembroke Center Archives. To mark the journal’s three decades of critical work, we spoke with the editors about the journal’s founding and its current work.

Let’s start with the name of the journal. Why “*differences*”?

At the time of the founding of the journal, European theories of difference, which challenged the universalizing and homogenizing tendencies of identity, coincided with strong US identity movements for civil rights and feminism. The name with the italicized *s* enacts this encounter—one that was fundamental to the debates of that time. And although the terms of the debate have continually changed over the years, the underlying questions have not. The most basic questions at the core of feminist inquiry are where does *difference* begin or end? And where do *differences* begin or end? Those questions emerged early on in feminist debates regarding racialized differences and differences having to do with lesbianism versus heterosexuality. Today’s questions are more numerous and equally complex, but generations of feminist theorists have grappled with them. In doing so, they repeatedly demonstrated the crucial importance of feminist theory for both speculative and political thinking, two modes of critical work necessary for any kind of change. By insisting on the importance of the italicized *s*, the journal acknowledges how difficult it is to answer the questions that the *s* poses but how vitally important it is to do so.

How do you choose the focus of each issue?

This varies. Sometimes, a prospective guest editor will approach the editors with a proposal for a special issue. This was the case with *Black Marriage*, edited by Ann duCille, and for *Sexual Politics, Sexual Panics*, edited by Robyn Wiegman. In other instances, a debate or current in mainstream discourse or academic circles prompts an issue, as was the case with *Reading Remains*, *Transatlantic Gender Crossings*, and *Bad Object*. It also happens that the editors will conceive of a special issue topic in conversation with other scholars, who will contribute to the table of contents as editors or as authors. Of course, *differences* also regularly publishes open issues that gather individual essays on a range of topics.



The journal is celebrating its 30th anniversary and just won an award for the way it took on the political stakes of contemporary sexual politics in the United States. Can you talk about how the journal stays nimble enough to respond to changing times and debates?

The journal has always sought and promoted critical work that begins with questions rather than conclusions, that is not afraid to take a second or third look at a theory or a political position that seems to enjoy undisputed consensus. Of course, issues and concerns change with the times, but what doesn’t change is the continued need for people who are not afraid to challenge dogma and to think in unexpected ways. *differences* works to find those people, to publish their critical contributions, and to encourage exciting debate. ■

From the Director

At the Pembroke Center, we do many things; we teach, undertake research and support research by others, curate archives and preserve history, publish a leading journal, host a wide range of public events, and maintain – and are sustained by – a vital intergenerational community. All of these activities come together in one organic program that is dedicated to thinking in a critical manner about the problems that besiege us today. They pertain, as we have said from the start, to the study of difference in multiple disciplines, contexts, venues, and media.

The news we share in this letter exemplifies how the facets of the Pembroke Center's program work together. It is wonderful to mark the 30th anniversary of *differences: A Journal of Cultural Studies*, which contributes to the Center's scholarly reputation, publishes the work of Pembroke Center postdoctoral fellows and leading scholars, is recognized for its impact on public discourse by awards like the one it received in January 2020 from the Modern Language Association,

and impacts how the Pembroke Center Archives curates collections.

Well over a decade ago, the editors of *differences* identified Hortense J. Spillers as a scholar whose history-making life and work would be of tremendous importance to the Pembroke Center Archives and those the archives serve. Now, in 2020, Spillers' collection is housed at Brown and seeing near-constant use just three months after it opened. Would Spillers' collection be part of the Pembroke Center Archives without the advice of the journal editors, the generous advocacy of visiting scholar Ann duCille, the hard work of Mary Murphy, the Nancy L. Buc '65 Pembroke Center Archivist and Assistant Archivist Amanda M. Knox – two staff members who would not be here without the support of the Pembroke Associates – and the existence of the Black Feminist Theory Project? What we achieve, we achieve together, and those accomplishments have repercussions that advance knowledge and understanding of the questions at the core of our intellectual mission.



I am grateful to lead such a dynamic Center, and for all the Pembroke Center Associates do to strengthen, support, and guide our work.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg'.

Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg
Director



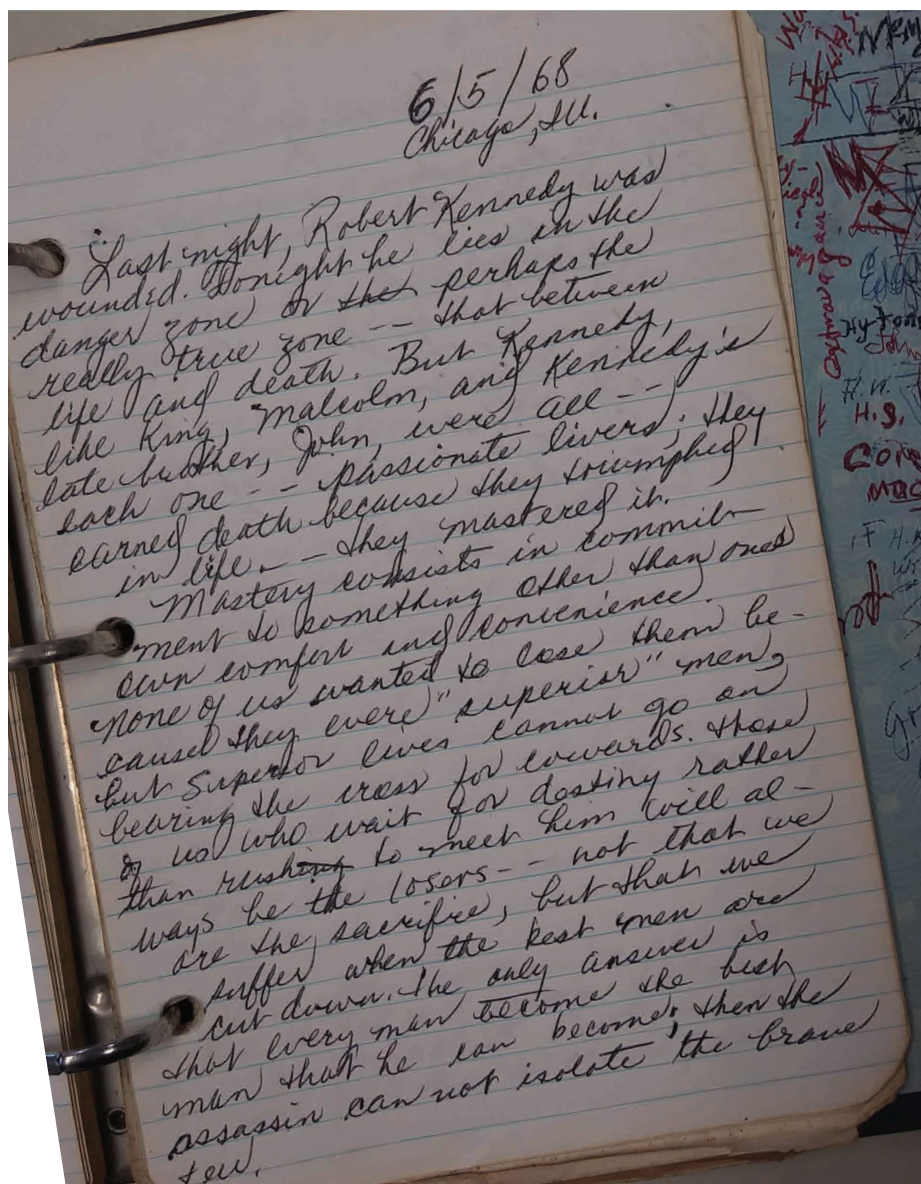
In Memoriam

ARLENE GORTON '52 (1932 – 2020)

It is with great sadness that we mark the passing of Arlene Gorton '52 on January 3, 2020. Gorton was a leader and champion in many ways, fighting for equality for women in physical education and intercollegiate athletics, and at Brown more broadly. Gorton served as chair of the physical education department and assistant professor of physical education at Pembroke. She went on to serve as the Associate Athletic Director at Brown for many years, retiring in 1998. At Brown, Gorton combated sexism and fostered opportunity, fairness, and equality for women in athletics, and pushed "for more women faculty members, more tenured women faculty members, more opportunity for women in every facet of Brown university life," as Nancy L. Buc '65 wrote when Gorton stepped down from the Pembroke Associates Council in 2012 after eight years of service. At that time, Liz Sherman '77, thanked Gorton for her major contributions to the Council, noting that Gorton spoke "always with the perspective of one who has been there and fought the good fight, who never ceases to hold Brown to high standards, and whose integrity is the foundation of all that she does and says." In honor of that spirit, each year Brown presents the Arlene Gorton '52 Cup to the female varsity athlete who most consistently displays the ideals of sportsmanship and fair play. The Pembroke Center is honored to house Gorton's two oral histories, available online at the Pembroke Center Oral History Project.

Spillers Papers

Continued from page 1



studies since the 1970s,” said Ann duCille, Emerita Professor of English at Wesleyan University and a visiting scholar in gender studies at the Pembroke Center.

“From early essays like ‘Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,’ to landmark interventions such as ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,’ Spillers’ scholarship has played—and continues to play—a major role in how we theorize race, class, gender, sexuality, and related social categories; how we read and write history, literature, and criticism; how

we understand the long reach of slavery and its legacies,” duCille continued.

The papers in Spillers’ collection date from 1966-1995. Included are diaries; unpublished writing, including fiction and poetry; correspondence with scholars including Gwendolyn Brooks, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Toni Morrison, and Gayatri Spivak; and drafts of her talks, articles, and books. Researchers can also find syllabi, lecture notes, scholarly journals, some rare print materials, and notes on Spillers’ experience in the academy.

The Spillers papers are being used by scholars working in American studies, English, Africana studies, gender and sexuality studies, and myriad other disciplines, Murphy said. Because the drafts in the collection trace the development of Spillers’ theoretical work, they could be particularly useful to students like those in the spring 2020 seminar entitled “Fanon and Spillers,” led by Kevin Quashie, Brown professor of English. In that course, Quashie uses the conceptual and theoretical work of Spillers and Frantz Fanon as frames for reading texts in the black literary canon. Spillers’ theories, Quashie said, invite her readers to “ride the length of a complicated thought” to try to get to something essential.

“To me, Spillers works to understand black consciousness,” Quashie said. “By consciousness, I don’t mean awareness, anything that we control; I don’t mean the idea of political intentionality. I mean consciousness as a feature of the human, how the human experiences their aliveness, their being human.”

Knox, who processed the collection, said, “Not just academics can access and pull meaning from this collection. Really, anybody can.”

Knox describes the papers as straightforward but poetic in nature, a record of a life that is fully lived. There is no dry recounting of events, but opportunities to read what an intellectual who was highly engaged with life and politics in the U.S. thought the night Robert Kennedy was shot, or her opinions of the first Star Wars movie, and notes on a play by Toni Morrison.

Building an archive of black feminist thought

Spillers contributed her collection to the Feminist Theory Archive in the name of the Pembroke Center’s Black Feminist Theory Project, which takes a multifaceted approach to enhancing the visibility and accessibility of black feminist discourse. In addition

to a lecture series, plans for hosting distinguished visiting scholars, and related programming, the Black Feminist Theory Project strives to build and make accessible an archive documenting black feminist scholars' work and lives.

"If Brown is going to fulfill its mission around documenting women's history and the history of feminist theory, Brown's special collections must include collections from scholars who center black feminist theory, intersectional theory, and transnational feminist theory to tell the whole story," Murphy said. "It is of utmost importance that our collections include a wide array of theorists and theories."

Now, Spillers' collection is part of what Murphy calls "a community of collections" that include those of duCille, whose scholarship pertains to African American literary and cultural studies

and investigates how popular culture and brand marketing influence perceptions and practices, and Christina Sharpe, a black feminist theorist whose work encompasses racism, feminism, and slavery. Other notable black feminist theorists such as Hazel Carby, author of "Imperial Intimacies," have plans to donate their papers to the Pembroke Center Archives in the future, Murphy said.

DuCille was instrumental in bringing Spillers' papers to Brown. She partnered closely with Murphy, met with Spillers in the spring of 2019 when Spillers was at the Pembroke Center for a research roundtable, and stayed in touch with her as she considered allowing her papers to be archived at Brown. Without duCille's advocacy and partnership, Murphy said, Spillers' papers, which Pembroke Center scholars and faculty had hoped to bring to Brown for more than a decade, might not have come to the University.

"I can't speak for everyone," duCille said, "but I suspect that for some of us, especially those of my vintage who are old enough to remember a time when there was little or nothing of a black female past—few records, few figures, no archive—it's history that motivates us to contribute our papers to an archive, a desire both to preserve the past and to record the process of recovering it. We hope that Pembroke's Feminist Theory Archive will become the nationally known repository of black feminist thought and theory as more and more scholars who helped define the field donate their papers in the name of the Black Feminist Theory Project."

In the fall, Spillers will be on campus for a Pembroke Center exhibition of her collection and an event featuring scholars including duCille, Quashie and others. ■

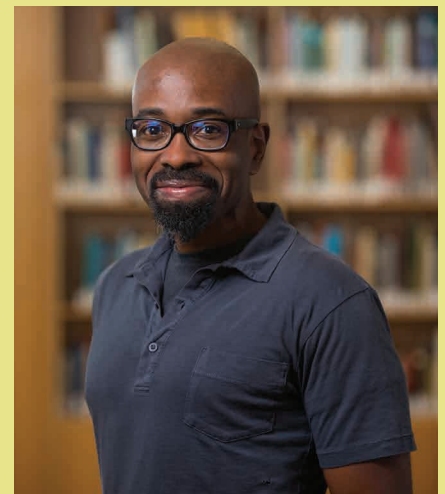
"To me, Spillers works to understand black consciousness. By consciousness, I don't mean awareness, anything that we control; I don't mean the idea of political intentionality. I mean consciousness as a feature of the human, how the human experiences their aliveness, their being human. So Spillers wants to explore how this basic and essential notion, consciousness, a very philosophical notion since it goes to the heart of exploring what it means to be—she wants to explore how this notion of consciousness relates to blackness. And what is exceptional about her thinking is that she takes for granted that thinking about blackness necessitates thinking about gender and gendering.

But you know the other thing I love about Spillers' work? How stylish it is. Yes, it is academic, learned, full of deep references. But its stylishness is more than this density: it is part of creating a voice on the page, like that of a persona or a poet or a preacher, to enact a rhythm that invites you to ride the length of a complicated thought since what matters is less that you understand it fully and more that you experience (sense, feel, encounter) its thrill and trouble. This stylishness is itself an argument, implicitly, about what it means to try to study without believing that we will arrive at an answer. These questions are questions of the human, of the black subject as

human, and we'd be arrogant in thinking that an answer was simple, easy, around the corner. Instead, Spillers takes us on the ride of her thinking-in-process, her thinking-ever-in-process, and in doing so, asks us to do some work too.

To me, there is a way in which this is not unlike what Toni Morrison's writing and thinking does. So, the chance to see even more of this in-process-ness, through the archive: that is a dream, really. It will be as if we deepening what we think we already know, what we know—deep down—that we don't know."

Kevin Quashie, Brown professor of English



Undergraduate and Graduate Student Grant Recipients

The Pembroke Center received many impressive applications for our graduate and undergraduate research grants. Student grant-winners represent 10 disciplines, from Africana studies to cognitive neuroscience, and their projects range across the globe, from New Zealand to the Caribbean. Among the grant recipients is a winner of a Rhodes Scholarship (Camila Pelsinger '20) and a student who participated in the Pembroke Center's Fall Weekend student panel on women's development (Ella Satish '20).

2019-20 Steinhaus/Zisson Research Grant Recipients

Felicia Denaud

Graduate Student, Department of Africana Studies

"At the Vanishing Point of the Word: Blackness and the Unnameable War"

Warren Harding

Graduate Student, Department of Africana Studies

"Bearing Witness, Holding Space: Black Caribbean Migrant Women and the Literacies of Belonging"

Nell Lake

Graduate Student, Department of American Studies

"Mother. Nurse. Housewife. Maid.: The Enduring Moral Politics of 'Women's Work' in America"

Kristen Maye

Graduate Student, Department of Africana Studies

"Black Studies Toward a Poetics of Black Critique"

Esha Sraboni

Graduate Student, Department of Sociology

"Making Meaning of Gendered Violence and the Law: Global Discourses and Local Realities in Bangladesh"

Ieva Zumbyte

Graduate Student, Department of Sociology

"Tracing the Quality of Public Childcare Services in Urban Settlements"

The Helen Terry MacLeod Research Grant

Camila Pelsinger '20

International Relations; Cognitive Neuroscience

"Restorative responses to gender-based violence in the United States & New Zealand"

The Barbara Anton Community Research Grant

Scarlett Bergam '20, MPH '21

Public Health

"'They should be taught self-respect, self-confidence and self-love.' The impact of education and conflicting social pressures on the sexual behaviors of South African Adolescents Living With HIV"



PHOTO CREDIT: JACK DARMODY

The Linda Pei Undergraduate Research Grant

Ella J. Satish '20

Latin American and Caribbean Studies; PLME

"El Programa de Atención Materno-Infantil: The Cuban Maternal Health System as a Model for Care of Black Mothers in the United States"

Enid Wilson Undergraduate Travel Fellowship

Tabitha Payne '20

Development Studies
"Golden Voice"

Camila Pelsinger '20

International Relations; Cognitive Neuroscience

"Restorative responses to gender-based violence in the United States & New Zealand"

Mohammed-Reda Semlani '20

Development Studies; Economics

"The economic impact of the Argan tree on the local communities in southwestern Morocco"

Pembroke Center Events

The Pembroke Center is hosting more than 40 public events during the 2019-20 academic year. Over 800 audience members attended events over the course of the fall 2019 semester.



1. **Pamela Reeves '87 P'22, Charlotte Silverman '22, Zahra Asghar '20, and Ella Satish '20** spoke about women's development projects to a large Family/Fall Alumni Weekend audience on October 19, 2019.
2. On February 11, **Clare Hemmings**, professor of feminist theory at the London School of Economics and Political Science, introduced a new body of work exploring how gender and sexuality are central to citizenship.
3. In September, Brown economist **Emily Oster** (pictured) and historian **Sarah Knott** spoke about how data and the historical record influence our understanding of motherhood.
4. Students, faculty, and community members filled Pembroke 305 to capacity for **Ellen Rooney's** October 2019 lecture on reading and feminist critique.
5. In October, **Kimberly Juanita Brown**, the Elizabeth C. Small Associate Professor of English and Africana Studies and Chair of Gender Studies at Mount Holyoke College, discussed how photography is used to negotiate the parameters of race, gender, and belonging. Her talk was part of the Black Feminist Theory Project lecture series.
6. **Jacques Lezra**, professor of Hispanic studies at the University of California, Riverside, gave a talk in November asserting that the task of political philosophers is to produce political concepts that enable a radically differentiated democratic society.

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