Cheryl A. Wall papers expand community of collections centering Black feminist thought

A trove of scholarship on African American literature and efforts to diversify university curricula

The papers of Cheryl A. Wall, who was a scholar of African American and African diaspora literature, the Harlem Renaissance, and Zora Neale Hurston, are now available for researchers through the Pembroke Center’s Feminist Theory Archive (FTA). Wall left her collection of papers to the FTA in the name of the Black Feminist Theory Project, which emphasizes the centrality of Black feminist analytics and works to enhance the visibility and accessibility of Black feminist discourse on and well beyond Brown’s campus. The Pembroke Center is honored to preserve, promote, and make available Wall’s work, and is grateful to Camara Epps, Wall’s daughter, who worked closely with the archives after Wall’s passing on April 4, 2020.

Wall was the Board of Governors Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English at Rutgers University, where she dedicated much of her almost 50-year career advocating for racial diversity in the curriculum and in universities as a whole. She pushed for the inclusion of Black authors in literature courses and established a requirement at Rutgers that all English majors complete a course in African American literature. Wall was also co-principal of a Ford Foundation-funded initiative called “Reaffirming Action: Designs for Diversity in Higher Education,” that examined the strategies higher education institutions successfully employ to enhance racial and gender equity. Readers and researchers can gain insight into how these efforts unfolded through the handwritten notes, correspondence, and meeting packets within the collection.

In addition to work on Zora Neale Hurston and the Harlem Renaissance, Wall’s extensive body of scholarship includes articles on Gloria Naylor, Gwendolyn Brooks, Jessie R. Fauset, June Jordan, Alice Walker, Lucille Clifton, Toni Cade Bambara, and many others. Her books include Women of the Harlem Renaissance and Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition.

Wall’s work also extended to the theater. She was the founding chairwoman of the board of Crossroads Theatre Company in New Jersey, whose mission includes a commitment to literary works that examine the African American experience as well as a celebration of the artistry of the African diaspora. Crossroads was the first African American theater to receive a Tony Award® (in 1999) in the category of Outstanding Regional Theatre in the United States. Wall’s work on this board is well documented in the collection through meeting agenda, correspondence, and handwritten notes. Access the collection online.

From the Director

As I sit down to write to you, I am filled with a familiar feeling of gratitude – that the Pembroke Center has such staunch friends and supporters – as well as a feeling that I regret has become familiar in the months that have passed since March of 2020: a disquiet and concern for your wellbeing as the COVID-19 pandemic continues. I hope you all are well, and I encourage you to be in touch with us at the Pembroke Center.

We would love to hear from you, and we hope that you will take advantage of our programming, whether it is listening to how others have experienced the pandemic via our COVID-19 series in the Pembroke Center Oral History Project or joining us for events like the February 5 panel on the award-winning book “Sex, Law, and Sovereignty in French Algeria, 1830-1930” by Judith Surkis ’92, a professor of history at Rutgers University and a member of the Pembroke Center Advisory Council.

The fall semester at the Pembroke Center was active, despite the challenges and changes wrought by the pandemic. The Pembroke Seminar has been the site of lively discussions and lectures, and all of our students continue to impress with their seriousness of purpose and adaptability to what we all hope are temporary changes to the way we teach and conduct programming. We have hosted excellent public lectures and discussions, including the October panel “Black Women and the Vote.” Moderated by Pembroke Center Advisory Council member Tanya K. Hernández ’86, P’20, the panel was a wonderful and timely discussion during this historic election year. If you missed it, watch the panel and Q and A here.

We are all looking ahead to the spring and summer semesters with hope and determination. The Pembroke Center is offering six GNSS courses, and will host highly influential and important scholars and theorists like Judith Butler and Daphne Brooks, among others. The Pembroke Center Archives continues to expand and deepen collections by and about women, and differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies has wonderful issues forthcoming.

With gratitude and best wishes in this new year,

Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg
Director

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A New Name for Pembroke Center
Friends and Supporters

Since its founding, the Pembroke Center has enjoyed and been strengthened by the advice, support, and engagement of its broad and dedicated community of alumnae/i and friends. The many ways this community participates in the work of the Center have enhanced our ability to carry out our intellectual mission and public humanities programming, and to enlarge conversations about gender and difference in a way that trains a keen eye on the historical record while opening up possibilities for the future.

We are pleased to announce two related name changes that we believe more accurately describe our community: the Pembroke Center Associates, who support the Center’s mission by making annual gifts to the Pembroke Center, will now be known as Friends of the Pembroke Center, and the Pembroke Center Associates Council will be known as the Pembroke Center Advisory Council. These changes are intended to reflect the inclusiveness of our community and to dispel any confusion arising from the terms “Associate” or “membership.” The Pembroke Center is open to all, and greatly strengthened by all of you who have shown and continue to show your support for our work.

We thank the members of the Nomenclature Committee, who in the fall of 2019 were charged with studying questions regarding the Pembroke Center’s membership and fundraising terminology and recommended these name changes. We are grateful to Committee Chair Leora Tanenbaum ’91, Emily Coe-Sullivan ’99, Barbara Dugan Johnson ’83, Marcia Ely ’80, Yvonne Goldsberry ’82, Ulle Holt ’66, Sophie Waskow Rifkin ’07, Victoria Westhead ’83, and Donna Zaccaro ’83 for their work.

We also thank you, our friends and supporters, for all that you do. Whether you have attended or participated in an event, contributed an oral history to the Pembroke Center Oral History Project or a collection of papers to the Pembroke Center Archives, or generously supported our students, faculty and researchers through annual gifts or Pembroke Center campaigns, we simply would not be the same without you.

Anne Buehl ’88
Chair, Pembroke Center Advisory Council
Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg
Director, Pembroke Center
This fall, the Pembroke Center awarded three grants to outstanding Brown students who are exploring questions of gender, difference, and power in the Caribbean, the Middle East, Africa, and the United States. One award-winning project takes a fresh look at a familiar psychological experiment’s origins in Trinidad, taking into account the impact of colonialism’s power dynamics on its findings, while another explores how contemporary constructions of womanhood in Ghanaian Christian communities affect perceptions of returnee women in its capital city. The third project uses community-engaged storytelling to intervene in the typical media portrayal of Syrian Muslim refugees in the United States as either objects of sensationalized suffering or political threats.

Due to the protracted uncertainty regarding the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to maintain the health and safety of the Brown community through restrictions on all University-sponsored international and domestic travel, grants were awarded only to projects that could be completed locally.

The Pembroke Center awarded Steinhaus/Zisson Pembroke Center Research Grants to Brown graduate students Jenny Dolan, a PhD candidate in American studies, and Deborah Frempong, a PhD candidate in anthropology as well as a Graduate Student Fellow in the 2020-21 Pembroke Seminar “Narrating Debt.”

The grants, honoring Beatrice Bloomingdale Steinhaus’33, P’60, P’65, GP’87, GP’91 and Gertrude Rosenhirsch Zisson’30, P’61, P’63, GP’91, support undergraduate and graduate student research on any topic related to the work of the Pembroke Center. Preference is given to research on women’s education, health, community activism, philanthropy, and economic status, and women’s rights and well-being in the United States and in developing countries around the world. Graduate students are awarded up to $2,000 grants for their projects.
The Pembroke Center awarded the Linda Pei Undergraduate Research Grant to Clare Boyle, a comparative literature concentrator. First awarded in 2008, the Linda Pei grant supports an undergraduate research project related to issues of women's empowerment such as gender equality in the workplace, access to reproductive health care, and women's political leadership. The grant offers up to $1,000 for research support.

**Clare Boyle '20.5**  
*Comparative Literature*

**“TO STEAL A DREAM”**

“To Steal a Dream” asks who gets to define identity, and what happens when how others see you isn’t how you see yourself. This project is an ongoing collaboration between Boyle and Providence high school student named Lina, whom Boyle met and worked with through the Brown Refugee Youth Tutoring and Enrichment program. Lina fled Syria with her family at age ten and lived in Jordan before being resettled in the United States. The project’s final form will be a multimedia website combining seven podcasts of Lina narrating her transnational journey with collages of her photos and memories from each place she has lived. “To Steal a Dream” constitutes a critical intervention into media representations which position young, female refugees, Muslim women in particular, as perpetual victims in need of saving. In creating the project, Boyle is building on research she undertook as an Undergraduate Fellow in the 2018-19 Pembroke Seminar “What Are (Human) Rights? Imperial Origins, Curatorial Practices and Non-Imperial Ground.”

**Jenny Dolan, Graduate Student**  
*Department of American Studies*

**“CONSTRUCTING WILLPOWER: THE ORIGINS OF THE MARSHMALLOW EXPERIMENT”**

Jenny Dolan’s dissertation is a cultural history of willpower. Her project tracks the changing meanings and uses of willpower throughout the twentieth century U.S. and explores willpower’s relationship to gender, race, and middle-class formation. In the chapter “Constructing Willpower: The Origins of the Marshmallow Experiment,” Dolan asks: how did willpower become a scientific fact? Psychologists agree that the most famous willpower experiment—the marshmallow experiment conducted at Stanford University by Walter Mischel and his colleagues—inaugurated the modern study of self-control. Mischel, however, conducted his first willpower experiments on Black and East Indian children in Trinidad during the 1950s, so Trinidad ought to be considered the birthplace of scientific willpower. Analyzing the experimental protocols that enabled willpower to emerge as an object of empirical knowledge, Dolan argues that Mischel did not discover in Trinidad a universal feature of human cognition called willpower. Rather, willpower was crafted by and through empire and the unequal power relations of colonialism.

**Deborah Frempong, Graduate student**  
*Department of Anthropology*

**“GENDERED MOBILITIES: FAITH, BELONGING AND SPATIAL GEOGRAPHIES OF RETURNEE WOMEN IN ACCRA”**

Debbie Frempong’s project looks at returnee women’s modes of belonging through their reintegration experiences in Accra, Ghana, connecting questions about transnationalism, belonging, gendered subjectivities and Christianity. It asks: what do returnee women's experiences reveal about gender, religion, and belonging in contemporary Ghana? And what is the significance of widely circulating discourses and representations that situate returnee women as figures of modernity? Consequently, it explores how the gendered politics of reintegration produces and mediates ideas of modernity and (post) colonial subjectivities. In doing so, it offers alternative ways to conceptualize the relationship between religion and belonging, looking at how social rupture, continuity and de-territorialism offers various opportunities for local and global forms of practice that coalesce, oppose or exist alongside each other. This project adds to these conceptualizations by highlighting the ways in which Accra’s religious landscape and returnee women’s cosmopolitan feminisms collide. By exploring these questions through the lens of belonging, it endeavors to show how returnee women create new communities and spatial geographies of care.


Women of Brown United (WBU) was a women’s liberation group, founded at Brown in September 1970, that advocated for equal representation of women in faculty positions, laid the groundwork for a women’s studies concentration and a women’s center, and called for the addition of medical practitioners dedicated to women’s reproductive healthcare on campus, among many other efforts.

“WBU exploded with a bang in 1970 and morphed in the mid-70s after the Sarah Doyle Women’s Center was founded in 1975 and took on many of the roles that WBU had been serving,” Pichey said. “I participated in the founding and first year of Women of Brown United, and that experience profoundly shaped my life.”

Pichey said she had always intended to write a history of the group, and saved many of the documents from the organization’s first year, taking them with her through various moves over a decade and a half. The founding of the Pembroke Center in 1981 and the establishment of the Pembroke Center Archives enabled Pichey to donate her BWU papers to the Christine Dunlap Farnham Archive and house them at Brown’s John Hay Library.

WBU endured as an organization on campus until the early 1990s, and the history includes a narrative of its founding, a chronology of its events and activities, and records of its members’ advocacy on numerous issues, ranging from admissions policies to domestic violence. Included in the history are sections on the founding of the Sarah Doyle Center for Women and Gender and the establishment of the Sojourner House, a shelter for women and children who were victims of intimate partner violence.

“The history draws primarily on the WBU files in the Christine Dunlap Farnham Archives, supplemented by articles from *The Brown Daily Herald* as well as some interviews that I conducted over the past few years,” Pichey said. She added that friends who were her contemporaries at Brown reviewed the history.

Pichey invites former members of WBU to add their recollections or suggest edits to the history by sending her an email at Mimi@Pichey.net.

For more information on WBU, see also the Sarah Doyle Center for Women and Gender records (collection number: OF-1ZSA-1).
Events

Keep up to date with our events on our homepage. For videos of past events, like our Black Women and the Vote panel, see our YouTube playlist. More videos will be added regularly!

Complicating Beauty: A Look at How Women Look
Tuesday, January 12, 2021

Distinguished Brown alumnae and faculty explore the idea of beauty: how and why it changes over time; the unique role of the beauty pageant; and the ways that society’s morphing definitions of “a beautiful woman” collide with race, class and gender.

“Sex, Law, and Sovereignty in French Algeria, 1830-1930”: A Conversation with Judith Surkis ’92
February 5, 2021

Panelists Nadje Al-Ali, Jennifer Johnson, Emily Owens, and Joan Wallach Scott will discuss the award-winning book by Judith Surkis ’92. Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg will moderate.

Black Feminist Theory Project/Shauna M. Stark ’76, P’10 Out of the Archives Lecture with Daphne Brooks
February 25, 2021
I’d like to make a gift to the Pembroke Center Associates!

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