

# PEMBROKE CENTER

## Associates Newsletter

### The 2020-21 Pembroke Seminar: Narrating Debt

In 2020-21, Peter Szendy, the David Herlihy Professor of Humanities and Comparative Literature at Brown University, will lead the Pembroke Seminar “Narrating Debt.” The problem of debt has grown more and more urgent in light of the central role played by indebtedness in neoliberal, financialized capitalism, and gender, race, and other forms of difference have emerged as key factors in analyzing historical or contemporary forms of debt.

Approaches to understanding or resolving debt come from many fields, disciplines, and angles. These include global histories of debt, claims for reparations in postcolonial debates, legal arguments about “odious debt” (when a country’s government misappropriates money it has borrowed from another



Painted Leaves, 2016 | PHOTO CREDIT: FAITH WILDING

country), and psychoanalytical readings of debtor characters in literature like Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*. Critical studies are being dedicated to topics ranging from sexual “marital debt” in Canon law to the targeting of women as reliable debtors in present-day microfinance practices.

The 2020-21 Pembroke Seminar will examine different ways of narrating,

or witnessing, the condition of being indebted and the historical rise of indebtedness as a mode of governance. Through the Pembroke Seminar, Szendy and participants will try to map rhetorical or narratological techniques, genres, and gendered voices within various narratives of debt. Debt itself will also be considered as a narrative, i.e. a performative fiction that organizes time by linking past,

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## 2020-21 Pembroke Center Postdoctoral Fellows

The Pembroke Center is pleased to introduce the three postdoctoral fellows who, in addition to teaching undergraduate courses and pursuing research projects, will participate in the Pembroke Seminar “Narrating Debt.”

**Hannah Frydman**, who earned her PhD in history from Rutgers University in 2020, is the 2020-21 Shauna M. Stark '76, P'10 Postdoctoral Fellow. Her dissertation, entitled “Classified Commerce: Gender, Labor, and Print Capitalism in the Parisian Classifieds, 1881-1940,” charts the rhetorical, social, and

material evolution of classified advertising in the Parisian press, focusing on ads placed by women for their services as fortune tellers, midwives, abortionists, prostitutes, masseuses, pimps, teachers, and more. By focusing on this alternative history of capitalism, rather than the narratives found in more classic economic and business archives, Frydman reveals the gendered and sexed blind spots included in financial histories. At Brown, she will teach the course “Sex and Money: The History of Paris since 1750.” This class will examine how sexual commerce shaped the identity of the city, how the commercial spaces of the

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# Narrating Debt

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present, and future. Hence, the first word in the proposed title for the seminar, “Narrating Debt,” should be considered both as a verb (the object of which is debt) and as an adjective (that qualifies debt as being intrinsically narrative).

The seminar will attempt to form a series of questions about the nature of debt (How does redemption or payment of a debt relate to ending, to completion in narrative terms?), and move on to a further series of questions that will address the contemporary context: Is capitalism, as Walter Benjamin suggested, an endless “cult” of debt? How does debt configure—or preempt—the future in general? How does this translate into a geopolitics of debt (the North-South divide, for example, as a creditor-debtor divide) and a micropolitics of debt (race and gender)? ■



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# From the Director

When we began the spring 2020 semester at the Pembroke Center, we were in a celebratory mood – we had had an incredibly productive fall, had just concluded the first-ever Gender and Sexuality Studies Wintersession course, and we had a full semester of teaching, programming, research, travel, and curation ahead of us. We were looking forward to welcoming to campus the Center’s External Review Committee, after having completed a thorough Self-Study that demonstrated our leadership position both at Brown and nationally and internationally.

Among the guest scholars whom we were looking forward to hosting were Lyndsey Stonebridge, professor of humanities and human rights at the University of Birmingham, UK, and Oneka LaBennett, associate professor of American studies and ethnicity at the University of Southern California. The interdisciplinary work of each of those scholars is urgent and speaks to the Pembroke Center’s intellectual mission. In March, as the coronavirus pandemic emerged as a global threat and the University shifted to remote operations, we had to respond quickly and cancel the Stonebridge and LaBennett lectures. Happily, however, we were able to adapt our plans so that Joan Wallach Scott, the founding director of the Pembroke Center and Professor Emerita at the School of Social Science in the Institute for Advanced Study, gave a rousing research lecture by videoconference in April. In May, poet and Professor of Performance Studies at NYU Fred Moten, scheduled to participate in a Research Roundtable organized by our postdoctoral fellows, led an excellent Zoom seminar. Both virtual events were attended by participants from all over the U.S. and overseas.

The pandemic led to many changes, from the way we conducted classes to the postponement of in-person Commencement exercises until 2021, but I have been gratified by the way

our students, faculty, and staff have risen to meet these challenges. There is no substitute for the freedom of interaction that characterizes Brown and pushes us to think deeply, listen openly, and advance our work so astutely, but we have managed, as a Center and as a community, to preserve the quality of inquiry in the Pembroke Seminar, to support and guide our students, to continue to build the archives, to produce a leading journal, and to plan for the year ahead. Beyond adapting, we have responded to this moment with new programs:

1. The Pembroke Seminar, under the name “Free In Direct Discourse,” will continue to meet through the summer. Scholars living all over the world will be able to join in conversation about pressing issues and maintain a sense of connection during this time.
2. The Pembroke Center Archives staff has built a riveting COVID-19-focused series within the Pembroke Center Oral History Project.
3. In collaboration with the Graduate School, we will host new summer proctorships at the Pembroke Center Archives and the journal, in order to support graduate students in need.

None of this could be done without your engagement, your ideas, and your work on behalf of the Pembroke Center. The Pembroke Associates ensure that the Pembroke Center is able to encourage and recognize outstanding student scholarship, build our intellectual community, and bring speakers and programming to the Center. The Associates have supported the Pembroke Center Archives so that it has the staff and capacity to conduct important documentary work. And importantly, the Pembroke Associates show up during these unusual times. Our most recent Associates Council meeting, conducted by Zoom, was very well attended, and I was particularly excited also to see members of the Associates Council at our late May



Free In Direct Discourse online seminar about the future of the university in the age of Covid-19.

Finally, I want to thank Jasmine Waddell '99, who served as Chair of the Associates Council for the last two years. With good humor, a terrific sense of focus, and great drive, Jasmine has helped guide the Council and the Pembroke Center. I hope you will all join me in thanking Jasmine for her service and vision during her term as Chair. She will be succeeded by Anne Buehl '88, who is stepping up from the position of Vice Chair, and Sophie Rifkin '07 will become the new Vice Chair of the Pembroke Associates Council.

During this time of great uncertainty when we do not know what the coming year will look like, I am heartened to know that the Pembroke Center is encircled by a strong community. Thank you for being part of this project, and thank you for your support of our mission.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which reads "Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg  
*Director*

# Congratulations, Graduates!

The Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women is pleased to congratulate the Brown class of 2020, and our wonderful Gender and Sexuality Studies program graduates. Academic year 2020 was the 37th Commencement for the program (and the 252nd Commencement for the University). To our five outstanding 2020 concentrators, we know great things are in store for you!

Quincy Confoy

Payton S. Gannon

Laura T. Jaramillo

Kayli H. Wren

Zenab Youssef



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## Postdoctoral Fellows

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city shaped sexual identities, and how discourses about sexuality contributed to the legitimation of capitalism.

**Nicolás Sánchez-Rodríguez**, the 2020-21 Carol G. Lederer Postdoctoral Fellow, earned his PhD in Latin American Studies from Duke University in 2020. His dissertation, “The Minted-City: Money, Value, and Crises in Nineteenth-Century Columbia” studies four financial instruments – stocks, bonds, bills of exchange, and paper money – and the mediation of their value performed by the narratives of economic and literary texts. Sánchez-Rodríguez uses economic criticism to explore the links between storytelling and money – as a social relation of debt – in economies based on credit. At Brown, he will teach the course “Boom Towns: Finance and Literature in Latin America,” which will focus on the works of authors such as Gabriel García Márquez, José María Arguedas, and Laura Restrepo to explore the implications of using the “boom town” metaphor to refer to the cultural production of the Latin American region since the nineteenth century.

**Sa Whitley**, the 2020-21 Nancy L. Buc Postdoctoral Fellow at the Pembroke Center, earned their PhD in Gender Studies at UCLA in 2020. Whitley, who also earned a master’s in African American Studies, is a Black feminist who utilizes queer of color critique and points to finance capital as crucial to the (re)production of precarity in Black women’s lives. Their dissertation, “Putting a Stake in the Ground: Black Women Organizing Geographies of Resistance in Subprime Baltimore,” attempts to particularize technologies of dispossession and displacement enacted by financial governmentality, and demonstrate their dependence on gendered anti-blackness. Whitley will teach the course “Conversations in Trans/Feminism: Theories, Cultures, & Politics” at Brown. The course will explore the bridges and tensions between trans movements and feminist movements by exploring activist and academic literature and cultural production at their intersections. ■

## The Pembroke Center Oral History Project takes on COVID-19

In March, the Pembroke Center Archives’ staff embarked on a project to record the history of the COVID-19 pandemic as it unfolds, soliciting and collecting first-person accounts by video chat from members of Brown’s extended community for the Pembroke Center Oral History Project. This rapid-response form of collecting oral histories builds an archive that will help historians contextualize the crisis, gives individuals the chance to reflect on their experience of the pandemic, and deepens our understanding of this exceptional period of time.

The project was noted by publications including *Smithsonian Magazine* (in the article [As COVID-19 Reshapes the World, Cultural Institutions Collect Oral Histories](#)), and includes accounts from students, alumnae/i, staff, and faculty from all over the United States and the world. Interviews with medical professionals touch on women’s health and emergency medicine during the time of COVID-19, while students from Wuhan, where the virus is thought to have originated, Mumbai, and New York City provide insight into disease hotspots. Interviewees talk about religion, grocery shopping, social distancing, political leadership, romantic relationships, and more.

In addition to preserving histories from women, transgender, and nonbinary individuals in the Pembroke Center Oral History Project, a partnership with the Brown University Library will preserve accounts from men via the Brown Digital Repository.

*Excerpts from the Oral History Project series*

**Dr. Sarah Fox '89:** “You know, Ebola was, as a disease, terrifying because if you got it, it was so uniformly serious. No one got away with an easy case of Ebola. But you know, the coordinated response from the federal government was so different. You know, our, our training in Rhode Island was led by the CDC [Centers for Disease Control]. You know, and so we were getting the same information as they were getting in Texas, or Florida, or California. And it seemed to be organized and coordinated. And if you needed the PPE [personal protective equipment], you put in an order and you received the PPE. And you know, and at that point [this spring], it was clear that we had no unified response [to COVID-19]. It was just chaos. And that was when I realized that things were going to get really, really bad.”

**Shuyan Wang '20:** “Yeah, I think, I think wearing masks is a big thing back home. Like, everyone is required to wear masks whenever they step outside of their house. And like there are doctors or community workers who actually go door to door to your house to take your temperature and like to make sure that you, you're not sick at that point. And I think it's pretty like unimaginable like in the US, like people wouldn't actually do that and also how, just like different countries have different attitudes towards, like, the gesture of wearing mass. I feel like back home it's like you wear masks to protect yourself, but also to protect others. And here, it's like, you only wear masks if you're sick. You don't wear it like if you're not..., especially in the beginning, I feel like, I feel pressured by my parents. They were asking me to wear masks whenever I go out, but here like nobody was wearing masks, and like nobody was taking, like apparent precautions, like in the beginning.”

**Noa Mintz '22:** “...my mom has been saying, 'What are you going to tell your children one day about COVID?' And I think, I guess I worry, will proximity be foreign to my children? This idea that I lived in these small dorms. That I was able to sit in a small office with a professor. That I was able to be in a massive lecture hall with my elbows touching the people next to me, and we were 500 people learning about the human brain. Will those be things that my kids, their jaws drop about? That's scary to me.”

**Yukti Agarwal '24:** “All of my friends helped me so much. And it was this moment of solidarity amongst all of us. In terms of having a feminist moment, I feel like this whole, this whole time was such a, it just showed me that I can go through these things alone. I can deal with these things, and I don't need someone to constantly help me to back me up, which is something I've never felt before because I've always depended on someone in my life. “

**Dr. Resa Lewiss '92:** “...I think one of the most eye-opening pieces, I think it's human nature to want to be able to categorize like, the patient will have fever and will have respiratory symptoms. Two weeks ago now I was a part of a webinar on the use of ultrasound for COVID-19, and what was eye opening and a little frightening, I would say to most of the clinicians, most of them were emergency doctors who are all about ultrasound. We were speaking with colleagues who are in Seattle because it seems you know, the Pacific Northwest got hit before maybe the Northeast, and they were saying that patients are presenting in all ways, shapes and forms. So someone that you think purely has a urine infection that's become a kidney infection, COVID positive. Elderly people, it's not a fever and it's not a respiratory symptom, it's they're just generally weak. So it was eye-opening to hear that COVID-19 can present in any way, shape or form.

Visit [brown.edu/initiatives/pembroke-oral-histories/](https://brown.edu/initiatives/pembroke-oral-histories/) and search click on COVID-19 in the “Topics” sidebar on the righthand side of the page. To participate in the project and contribute your own story, email [pembroke\\_archives@brown.edu](mailto:pembroke_archives@brown.edu) to schedule a video chat.

# Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic

The Brown experience is known for its discipline-crossing openness, spontaneity, and customizability. In March, as the University took actions to protect the health of the community by shifting to remote teaching and learning, Pembroke Center faculty quickly adjusted to a whole new way of teaching, advising, and working with students. Faculty made use of Zoom videoconferencing and seminars, the online annotation app Hypothesis, Google documents, and Brown's online learning tool called Canvas, as well as, of course, the telephone, email, and more. Here, some of our faculty comment on that experience.

**Denise Davis, Senior Lecturer**

*Spring 2020 course: Method, Evidence, Critique: Gender and Sexuality Studies across the Disciplines*

I'm teaching the GNSS graduate methods seminar this semester. The most unexpected but really not surprising part of having to shift so abruptly to online teaching/learning has to do with feelings. I'm glad we had time early in the semester to begin developing relationships among ourselves before we were forced to take an unexpected two-week hiatus. That two weeks was full of uncertainty and logistical challenges. Undergraduates scrambled to pack and leave, to say good-bye to friends, to organize with parents and airlines and storage facilities. On campus, people were tender and caring. One of my sophomore advisees told me he kept bursting into tears at any moment of the day. I helped him move his stuff to his grandmother's house in Pawtucket. We hugged when we parted,

and I was worried about his plan to fly home to Pittsburgh. He ended up renting a car and driving.

I was surprisingly moved to see the students in my seminar the first time we met on Zoom after that two-week break: to see their faces, their expressions—and to hear their voices. I look forward to that every week. On the other hand, Zoom isn't great for group discussions. The natural flow of in-person conversation is broken. If someone interjects while another is speaking, both are canceled out. We hesitate before responding to one another to avoid this, effectively hanging back. Particularly annoying is when the screen freezes, especially if someone's Internet connection goes out while they're speaking but they don't know it so they keep talking, unaware that no one can hear them. "What was the last thing you heard me say?" For some reason, it's always a little embarrassing.

# Pembroke Center Prizewinners

In my class, we post our responses to readings and to one another's comments on Canvas discussion threads. It lacks the spontaneity of in-person discussions, the generativity of thinking together in a fractal way. Participation isn't consistent, as concentration and focus wax and wane, but one-on-one meetings are okay. It's curiously intimate to sit in my kitchen and talk to a student sitting in their home. I see their pets. I am oddly self-conscious onscreen, though I'm growing used to it. We try to maintain connection with connectivity.

My students have really shown up. We are all trying, and it's good enough for now.

**Jeremy Lehen, Associate Director of the Pembroke Center**  
*Spring 2020 course: Constructing Men, Projecting Masculinity: Questioning Gender, Sex, and Sexuality in Brazil*

"Our students are very generous and have responded well. I believe that it is difficult to evaluate or make generalizations beyond the moment because the online shift has also occurred in a specific context. We will need to evaluate how the two things (the move online and the shutdown/social isolation-distancing) interacted. The experience of online learning will be very different in other contexts. In sum, students have responded well, but it is also in part because it has been seen as a temporary and necessary change without many alternatives.

Zoom works better than expected, but has very quickly revealed its limitations and the benefits of in-person meetings and discussions. At the same time, it will assist people in adding online components to their classes that may serve to create more interactive out-of-class activities/homework and reduced the fear of online learning when used intelligently in a limited and controlled way. This experience has also expanded opportunities to make the classroom more accessible to students who may face challenges to attend a class in person. However, to integrate the technology part into our in-class meetings, we will need to improve our teaching infrastructure to allow for a more seamless integration of these technologies into the actual classroom setting."

**Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, Director of the Pembroke Center**

*Spring 2020 courses: The Question of Critique; Italian Thought: Inside and Out*

"In terms of continuing to teach my collaborative humanities graduate seminar [Italian Thought: Inside and Out], Laura Odello and I were at an advantage because we had met the students; we had been working with them for half a semester. In the Pembroke Seminar, we'd been together for a semester and a half, so we had that personal connection and established relationships. That's the big difference in making this work online, if you have a connection or not. We will see how this goes next semester." ■



**Sebastián Niculescu** won the **Ruth Simmons Prize** in Gender and Women's Studies for her honors thesis "Ábreme: Performing Trans of Color Critique." Written for her ethnic studies concentration in the American studies department, "Ábreme" ("open up" or "let me in" in Spanish) melds Latin American decolonial and black feminist scholarship in a

work that examines trans pop and street performers, and proposes new ways of understanding trans realities. Leticia Alvarado, assistant professor of American studies, wrote that "'Ábreme' is an elaboration of, and significant contribution to, the nascent field of trans of color critique."



Development studies concentrator **Tabitha Payne** won the **Joan Wallach Scott Prize** for her honors thesis "Queer Histories of the Khmer Rouge Regime: Surviving Sex/Gender and Genocide." In her thesis, Payne argues that under the Khmer Rouge's genocidal trans-homophobic state (1975 – 1979), queer Cambodians

found spaces for relationality under the mandated "men's" and "women's" dormitories, eating groups, and work units. Focusing on the stories of three trans men who found love and friendship in the same commune, she embeds queer survivors' narratives into the long arc of Cambodian history.



**Virginia Thomas** won the **Marie J. Langlois Dissertation Prize** for her dissertation in American studies titled "Dark Trees: Regional Archives of Familial Intimacy, Lynching Violence, and Racial Reproduction in the US South." Using archival scrapbooks and family albums, Thomas explored how souvenir images of lynchings, alongside images of family trees

and private photos, show how lynching shapes racial, gendered, and sexual politics in the American South.



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