

Annual Report

Institute for Research on Women, Rutgers University, 2024-2025

Chie Ikeya (Director) & Sarah Tobias (Executive Director)

OVERVIEW

2024-2025 was an active and productive year at IRW. Our annual theme was “Knowing Otherwise: Haunting, Conjuring, and Spectral Encounters,” a continuation of our previous year’s theme, “Possession.” This theme was integrated throughout our core programming—the weekly seminar, Distinguished Lecture Series, and undergraduate learning community. We also held a day-long “Knowing Otherwise” conference on March 6. Additional events this academic year included four workshops in the Rutgers Public Engagement Project, which IRW organizes. January saw the publication of *Public Catastrophes, Private Losses*, the third volume in IRW’s *Feminist Bookshelf* series with Rutgers University Press, while May saw the publication of “Dissenting Feminisms,” the tenth issue of our online journal *Rejoinder*, which is published in collaboration with the Feminist Art Project.

The following report summarizes IRW’s activities and initiatives in the 2024-2025 academic year.

CORE PROGRAMMING

IRW Interdisciplinary Research Seminar

As mentioned above, the theme for IRW’s 2024-2025 interdisciplinary faculty/graduate student seminar—and all our core programming—was “Knowing Otherwise: Haunting, Conjuring, and Spectral Encounters.” In addition to the IRW Director and Executive Director, a total of 15 individuals participated in this year’s seminar: 7 Rutgers faculty members, 3 Rutgers graduate students, IRW’s Presidential Visiting Faculty Fellow, a Fulbright Nehru Doctoral Fellow, a Presidential Postdoctoral Associate, a visiting postdoctoral scholar, and a Douglass alumna. Scholars attending the seminar were affiliated with the History, Music, AMESALL, Human Ecology, Anthropology, Childhood Studies (Camden), and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies departments.

The academic year began with exploring a set of scholarly readings that addressed the annual theme. However, most seminar discussions showcased participants’ research on topics as varied as “Asiatic Femininity and the ‘Yellow Woman’ in Western Classical Music,” “Moving Pictures: Intergenerational Afterlives of Asian, Arab, and African Seamen’s Identity Photographs,” and “A Witch, a Mother, a Healer: Gendered Roles, Kinship Principles, and the Status of Women among Ngaju and Endenese Indigenous Communities of Indonesia.” Seminar members attended IRW’s public engagement workshops, which were open to the entire university community, and also attended and helped moderate panels during IRW’s Spring conference (see later in this report for more information on both these initiatives).

Final evaluations by participants praised the seminar for being “very respectful,” “generative,” and a “non-hierarchical” but “robust intellectual environment.” The majority of seminar members report

interacting with other participants beyond the scheduled weekly sessions to get feedback on their work and career advice, as well as socially. Many seminar fellows noted that the seminar had helped them “navigate a book project,” polish a proposal, and present or publish their work. Participants especially appreciated the seminar’s interdisciplinarity, crediting it as “an amazing opportunity to get feedback from peers and faculty from other disciplines” in ways that sharpened their own intellectual versatility and enabled their work to speak to different audiences.

IRW’s “Knowing Otherwise” Seminar

Comments from evaluations

“I found the level of interaction across different career stages and disciplines quite extraordinary.”

“It has given me invaluable insights into the future of an academic journey and wonderful connections and friends.”

“The seminar was really instrumental in helping me to finish my book, particularly in revising the introduction.”

IRW Distinguished Lecture Series

IRW held four events in its Distinguished Lecture Series during the 2024-2025 academic year. Faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates from a range of departments attended the events, as did students in IRW’s undergraduate learning community, representatives from the Institute for Women’s Leadership, and local community members.

- In **“Deadly Spaces: Haunted Homes and Haunting Histories”** (October 10, 2024), **Tithi Bhattacharya** (Purdue University) explored how, in colonial India, Bengalis and the British used ghost stories to establish competing understandings of power and historicity. Traditionally, Bengali ghosts haunted the outdoors and were found in particular types of trees, as well as marshes and graveyards; British ghosts, by contrast, haunted the home. With the advent of modern Gothic literature, some Bengali ghosts moved indoors. However, the homes they haunted were differently located from those inhabited by British ghosts. British ghosts typically frequented Calcutta mansions and were used to invent history and consolidate British rule in the city, but Bengali ghost stories were often set outside Calcutta, where ancestral homes were located. By situating ghost stories in locations with older, pre-colonial histories, Bhattacharya argued that Bengalis disputed Calcutta’s antiquity, along with the legitimacy of British rule.
- In **“Bodies, Knowledge, and Sovereignty”** (December 5, 2024), **Deborah Thomas** (University of Pennsylvania) discussed what sovereignty might look like if it was removed from the domain of states, juridical systems, and international politics, and instead considered in relationship to the everyday lives of people and their efforts to assert

autonomy and self-determination. Her talk explored these concepts through the lens of Kumina, an African form of spirituality, music, and movement that was brought to Jamaica by indentured servants after 1838. Analyzing an annual Kumina festival she organizes, Thomas argued that dance elicits a type of “exorbitant sovereignty,” and Kumina a type of trans corporeality, when the human soul becomes multiple, and external to the body that is otherwise its receptacle. The feeling of bodily freedom that ensues is a potential site for political engagement that can also upend Western ways of knowing. Thomas, therefore, argued that “being attuned to the body’s inheritances can provide inroads into genealogies of sovereignty alternative to those that are tethered to the foundational frames of property, accumulation, and dispossession.”

- In **“Radical Death Studies: Death Work as Anti-Racist Practice”** (January 30, 2025), **Mensah Adinkrah** (Central Michigan University) and **Kami Fletcher** (Goucher College) discussed how to reconfigure scholarship on death through a decolonial lens. Adinkrah described how socio-cultural notions of gender shape mourning and death rituals in Ghana. Fletcher talked about her research on Black grief and mourning and African American burial grounds, as well as the scholarship and activism of the Collective for Radical Death Studies (CRDS), a group of academics, funeral directors, activists, students, and practitioners who see their work on death as “synonymous with actively dismantling oppression and as a way to validate cultural and social life among marginalized groups.” Both scholars’ work was consonant with the CRDS’s mission, “to interrogate the field of Death Studies to decolonize and de-center whiteness while calling to radicalize death practices, all in theory and in practice from a variety of angles.”
- In **“The Witch Works: Altars, Archives, Affects”** (April 10, 2025), **Kay Turner** (folklorist and performer) and **Ann Cvetkovich** (University of Texas at Austin) gave a “performative lecture” about witch work as a way of knowing otherwise. Arguing that the figure of the witch is a useful pedagogic tool, Turner and Cvetkovich demonstrated witch-related rituals of recognition and return, co-created an altar, sang about crafting through the lens of feminist affect theory (inviting audience participation), and discussed the history of witchcraft. Extensively deploying queer theory, the scholars emphasized the relationship between witchcraft and transgression on the one hand, and witchcraft and freedom on the other. A witch, according to Turner, “soars above the worldly patriarchal definitions and confinements of woman,” and in the process, “she animates her own freedom and desires,” representing “the self-performing woman performing herself.”

IRW Undergraduate Learning Community

Since the 2007-8 academic year, IRW has pioneered the development of an undergraduate learning community based in a research institute, offering advanced undergraduate students an intimate yet rigorous environment for intellectual growth. During 2024-2025, IRW ran two semester-long learning communities (Fall 2024 and Spring 2025), led by Undergraduate Learning Community Coordinator Sara Perryman. Ms. Perryman is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Rutgers-New Brunswick, writing a dissertation on critical university studies and decolonizing composition pedagogies.

Under Sara’s guidance, a total of 34 students from 17 majors, ranging from Mathematics, Plant Science, and Entomology to English, Criminal Justice, and Public Health, participated in IRW’s Learning Community during the 2024-25 academic year. Students attended IRW’s Distinguished

Lecture Series, gathered to connect and discuss related readings, films, and other classroom materials, and actively engaged in the course Canvas site, as they developed their own thinking on the theme, “Knowing Otherwise: Feminist Forays into the Supernatural.” The theme asked students to open up to new worlds of possibility and engage with non-material and spectral forms of existence, from artificial intelligence to ancestral spirits.

IRW Undergraduate Learning Community on “Knowing Otherwise”

“Instructor Sara Perryman created a wonderful, safe environment for everyone to address their connections about the current political climate. Also, she helped me connect with the rest of my classmates when it comes to talking freely without judgement!”

“I like how we explored different structures of class time. We visited the museum, had a guest author, and went to the gardens. I enjoyed how these changes in the environment gave us opportunities to be creative and share ideas on what we were doing.”

“I highly recommend this course for anyone who wants to create a community with diverse students!”

Topics were explored through a range of activities both inside and outside the classroom. Students probed their lived experience of the relationship between past and present – embodied, sensory, or otherwise – through visual and written work. After a hike and picnic at Rutgers Gardens, they built small altars using various live plants, found objects, and personal relics to honor those who have come before them – trailblazers, whether family, friends, or public figures. They visited the Zimmerli Art Museum several times to view the exhibits, *Smoke & Mirrors*, *Indigenous Identities: Here, Now, & Always*, and *My Powerful Hair*, to consider how other ways of knowing are reflected in art. Students also watched the film, *Look into My Eyes*, Lana Wilson’s documentary about psychics in New York City. They read new research on animal, plant, and fungal intelligence, Gen Z spiritual practices, and the role technology plays in their health and wellbeing, and both classic and new texts on feminist epistemology, especially those by Black, Indigenous, and Latine scholars. Class discussions afterward focused on how we can mobilize other ways of knowing to help approach – and indeed, solve – some of the most intractable problems the world currently faces. Students also learned about public scholarship and how to conduct research through innovative formats.

IRW Spring Conference

On Thursday, March 6, 2025, IRW held a day-long spring conference tied to the annual theme, “Knowing Otherwise.” The conference featured 3 panels: “Transit Memories as Haunting: Andean Indigenous Women and Activism Beyond Borders,” a conversation between indigenous Peruvian activists Elva Navarro and Mavila Paucar from the organization PEX Semillas de Libertad, and Rutgers WGSS Professor Evelyn Autry; “Materializing Absence: Art, Photography, and Spirits,” a panel discussion with Rutgers Professors Zeynep Gursel (Anthropology), Dana Luciano (English & WGSS), and Hilit Surowitz-Israel (Religion); and “Conjure: The Feminine as Oceanic Force,” a presentation by IRW’s Presidential Visiting Fellow Fernanda Villarroel Lamoza with responses from

Rutgers professors Christina Knight (Art History) and Carlos Decena (Latino and Caribbean Studies & WGSS).

The conference also featured a keynote address, “The Dictator’s Two Bodies: The Politics of the Paranormal in the Twentieth Century Philippines” by University of Michigan-based historian and cultural anthropologist Dierdre de la Cruz, and a band performance, “OTHERWISE: Queer Scholarship into Song -- and More!” by Kay Turn Her and the Pages, featuring lead singer Kay Turner (Douglass College Class of 1971).

The conference was cosponsored by Rutgers University Libraries and the Center for Women in the Arts at Douglass and attended by more than 60 people, including Rutgers undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and community members.

IRW PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

IRW ran a series of four events in the Rutgers Public Engagement Project during 2024-2025:

- On October 31, 2024, Brendane Tynes (2023-2024 Sawyer Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in Black Liberation Studies & WGSS, Rutgers and former co-host of Zora’s Daughters podcast) led a workshop entitled “**Podcasting 102: Making a Plan.**”
- On November 14, 2024, Angelique Haugerud (Professor Emerita of Anthropology, Rutgers) led a workshop entitled “**How to Take Your Scholarly Article to a Wider Audience.**”
- On February 27, 2025, Arlene Stein (Sociology, Rutgers) led a workshop entitled “**Writing Books for General Audiences.**”
- On March 27, 2025, Brittney Cooper (WGSS, Rutgers) led a workshop entitled “**Public Scholarship Under Duress.**”

IRW PUBLICATIONS

IRW Book Series: *The Feminist Bookshelf*

Public Catastrophes, Private Losses, the third book in IRW’s new Rutgers University Press book series, *The Feminist Bookshelf: Scholarship for the 21st Century*, was published on January 14, 2025. This volume is based on IRW’s work during the 2018-2019 and 2020-2021 academic years. It features contributions by former IRW seminar fellows as well as scholars and activists who were speakers in IRW’s Distinguished Lecture Series, including Naomi Klein, Marisa J. Fuentes, Christina Sharpe, Michelle Commander, Jennifer Flynn Walker, Bela August Walker, Marcia Gallo, Carmen Vázquez, Kathleen C. Riley, Smruthi Bala Kannan, Stacy S. Klein, Ellen Malenas Ledoux, Basuli Deb and Leslye Amede Obiora. This volume was edited by Sarah Tobias and Arlene Stein.

Rejoinder Journal

In May 2025, IRW published the 10th issue of its online journal, *Rejoinder*, a forum for feminist, queer, and social justice-inspired work. The theme of this issue was “Dissenting Feminisms.” This issue of *Rejoinder* featured artwork, poetry, fiction, and essays by: Tina Escaja, Vuyokazi Ngemntu,

Ildikó Kalapács, Destiny Crockett, Catherine A. Evans, Jessie B. Ramey, Mahdijeh Govah, Judy Rohrer, Jaime Cantrell, Avik Sarkar, Sheila Shankar, Soo Young Lee, and Alexis Krasilovsky. This issue of *Rejoinder* was edited by IRW Executive Director Sarah Tobias, *Rejoinder's* founding editor and editor-in-chief. The journal is a partnership with The Feminist Art Project. It may be viewed online at: <http://irw.rutgers.edu/rejoinder>.

CO-SPONSORSHIPS

As part of our commitment to collaborating with other units, IRW continued to co-sponsor events with a diverse spectrum of centers, departments, institutes, and collaboratives, including the Rutgers Advanced Institute for Critical Caribbean Studies, Center for American Women and Politics, South Asian Studies, Global Asias, Douglass Residential College, Center for Women in the Arts at Douglass, and Rutgers University Libraries. The range of our co-sponsored activities in 2024-2025 can be seen in IRW's calendar of events (attached). The Director and Associate Director will continue to cultivate significant relationships and pursue possible collaborations with Rutgers units and entities beyond the university.

VISITING SCHOLARS AT IRW

In Fall 2024, we welcomed three visiting scholars to IRW: Smruthi Bala Kannan, who was previously a postdoctoral scholar at the University of Chicago; Anna Lynn Tom, a Fulbright Nehru Doctoral Fellow and a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad; and Fernanda Villarroel Lamoza, Presidential Visiting Faculty Fellow at Rutgers and Assistant Professor in Africana Studies at Davidson College.

Dr Smruthi Bala Kannan, who has a Ph.D. in Childhood Studies from Rutgers-Camden, has been working on a project entitled "Specters in Public Health and Childhood," exploring the role of haunting and absent presences in adolescent hygiene and sanitation discourses in urbanizing Tamil Nadu, India. At IRW, she had developed her book manuscript and written a book proposal, as well as a graphic/illustrated book chapter based on her dissertation.

Anna Lynn Tom has used her stay at IRW to conduct research for and write her doctoral dissertation, which seeks to understand the rise of feminist art in the Indian avant-garde and explore how it is informed by theories of performative embodiment, affect (Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed), and phenomenological art history. On a theoretical level, her study is informed by contemporary theories in Indian art history by Geeta Kapur and Deeptha Achar. Anna has worked closely with Rutgers faculty emerita Ferris Olin and Judy Brodsky, made considerable use of the Miriam Schapiro archives on Women Artists at Douglass Library, and completed a draft manuscript of her dissertation.

Dr. Fernanda Villarroel Lamoza has spent the 2024-2025 academic year at IRW transforming her doctoral dissertation into a book manuscript tentatively entitled, *Refiguring the Feminine: Reparative Art Practices from The Black Atlantic*. Dr. Villarroel Lamoza's work draws on West African epistemologies to understand the feminine not as a matter of biological difference, or even in relation to the representation of women, but as a politically informed position that is permeable, vulnerable, and open to potentially destructive otherness. Each of her chapters analyzes artwork through modes in which the refiguring of the feminine manifests: conjuring, refuge, lineages, and melancholia. She argues that reparative art practices do not meet neoliberal-progressive expectations of healing and

repair, but rather “stay with the brokenness to rearrange the parts into a world which may not simply revert the current order of things but is fully yet to come.”

TOWARDS 2025-2026

IRW’s annual theme for 2025-2026 is “Feminism, Academic Freedom, and Democracy.” The American Association of University Professors defines academic freedom as “the freedom of a teacher or researcher in higher education to investigate and discuss the issues in his or her academic field, and to teach and publish findings without interference from administrators, boards of trustees, political figures, donors, or other entities.” Many scholars have suggested that academic freedom and democracy exist in a symbiotic relationship, with democracy constituting a necessary precondition for academic freedom and academic freedom serving as “one of the checks and balances of a democratic system.” Yet scholarship that addresses the relationship between academic freedom and democracy from a feminist perspective or considers how preexisting conclusions about the relationship between academic freedom and democracy might be complicated by gendered knowledge remains limited. At a time when critical thinking is under attack worldwide and with a scope that ranges from the global to the local, our seminar will explore how feminist pedagogy and scholarship can help recast academic freedom more inclusively, (re)build democracy, and articulate new political imaginaries.

We hope that the School of Arts and Sciences will continue to support our infrastructure and programming as we explore the important issues that our annual theme raises.

IRW Staff 2024-2025	About the IRW
Director Professor Chie Ikeya Executive Director Sarah Tobias, Ph.D. Undergraduate Learning Community Coordinator Sara Perryman	At the forefront of feminist research for nearly fifty years, the Institute for Research on Women (IRW) advances cutting-edge, interdisciplinary, feminist scholarship on gender, women and sexuality. Part of the School of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, IRW was founded in the mid-1970s by faculty and administrators seeking to expand feminist scholarship and activism beyond the university’s fledgling Women’s Studies program. Today, IRW supports a broad range of programming designed to stimulate research on women, gender, and sexuality within and across the disciplines, throughout and beyond Rutgers. Promoting faculty and student connections and building intellectual community are also central to IRW’s mission. Affiliate members of IRW currently include almost 900 faculty, graduate students, and advanced undergraduates drawn from a wide range of disciplines at the New Brunswick, Newark and Camden campuses.

