



## A Reader's Personal Archive of Gloria Naylor

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### Introduction:

This assignment was originally given to students in English/WGSS 391: Gloria Naylor and Her Archive at Lehigh University. This upper-level seminar, cross-listed for English as well as Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies students, reads the extraordinary novels of Gloria Naylor in the context of her archive, which was on loan to Lehigh University at the time. Now, that archive is accessible to others via [the Gloria Naylor Archive](#). We focused our attention on the four novels in Naylor's quartet: *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills*, *Mama Day*, and *Bailey's Cafe*. As we read, we investigated how the extensive research materials, correspondence, diary entries, unpublished creative works, and early drafts of published novels in her archive can inform our interpretations.

Gloria Naylor's novels and collected papers offer a window on key issues in twentieth-century African-American literature and criticism: Black aesthetic, religious, and philosophical traditions; transnational literary networks; the violence of academic epistemologies; the enduring legacies of enslavement; and Black feminisms/womanism. Our engagement with Naylor's works was rooted in a broader consideration of how archives and records "serve as tools of oppression and liberation," in the

words of Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand. This assignment was part of the course's goal to help students learn how to locate writers' archives, how to use finding aids and digital archival resources, and how to transcribe, edit, and interpret archival documents through hands-on assignments focused on [the Naylor Archive](#). Through discussions of feminist and anti-racist methodologies in archive studies by Marisa Fuentes, Saidiya Hartman, and Alice Walker, the course also considered the archival practices that best align with Naylor's political, intellectual, and aesthetic vision.

While this is technically a single assignment, I incorporated it throughout the course, with deadlines along the way where students could focus on adding to their reader's archive and I could check in on their progress. Such an assignment can help scaffold other, larger assignments like the "Gloria Naylor Archival Exhibition" assignment that served as a culminating project for the course. Ultimately, whether paired with such larger assignments or not, this assignment helps students keep track of what they are reading and looking at, as well as helps them start to think through and narrativize the connections they are making as they are making them.

## Activities/Handouts/Discussion Questions:

- **Learning Outcomes:**
  - To *experiment with* and *cultivate* an expansive research practice that approaches a primary literary text through a variety of interpretive contexts.
  - To reflect critically on the creation and description of archival documents—and, more broadly, on what is illuminated and what is obscured by how we structure evidence and categories of knowledge.
- **Task:** For this assignment, you will collect, describe, and reflect on documentary records that speak to *your own* reading of each of the novels in Gloria Naylor's quartet: *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills*, *Mama Day*, and *Bailey's Café*. This task includes three components as described in more depth below: (1) Records; (2) Metadata; (3) Written Reflections. For more information on each, please see the longer descriptions in Appendix A.
  - **RECORDS:** You will create *up to 5* documentary records of your reading of the novel. These records testify to the ways in which you made sense of the novel as you read. This is an opportunity to think creatively about the experiences, practices, and resources that inform your interpretation of a literary work. To get you started, here's a preliminary list of ideas. You can also use your reading of *In Search of the Color Purple*

and your exploration of the records in the Gloria Naylor Archive as inspiration.  
(*Think*: How does Naylor document her own reading and research practices?)

- METADATA ABOUT EACH RECORD: For each record, you will create metadata—standardized descriptive terms for characterizing the item. Remember that creating metadata is a kind of *interpretive work*. Contextualize each record with details like title, date, creator, description, etc. (For full list, see Appendix A.)
- WRITTEN REFLECTION: In a 1000-1500 word written essay, explain how the archival records you have assembled inform your interpretation of the novel. Use these records to anchor a reading of the novel. Your reading of the novel can take many different forms, depending on what interests you as you compile your archive.
- **Purpose:** You will be cultivating an expansive and creative research practice that will help you both better understand the key texts we are reading in this course as well as developing a personal archive for your own use as you look toward more involved projects and essays later in this course. These records can also help you start thinking about these texts’ relevance to your life and interests beyond this course just as they also look beyond the texts themselves to think about what historical, cultural, and theoretical contexts relate to what you are reading.
- **Criteria/Grading:** While a strict rubric wasn’t used to grade this assignment, a series of criteria did guide my narrative comments to students as feedback. In addition to checking all the boxes outlined in the “Task” description above, I graded and commented based on their creativity, their ability to analyze materials form as well as content, their willingness to experiment with different interpretive lenses, and the depth of their contextualizations. For more detailed discussions of these criteria, see the detailed descriptions of each component of the assignment in Appendix A.

## Contextual Materials/Resources/Further Reading:

- [The Gloria Naylor Archive](#)
- *In Search of the Color Purple: The Story of an American Masterpiece* by Salamishah Tillet
- *The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor
- *Linden Hills* by Gloria Naylor
- *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor
- *Bailey’s Café* by Gloria Naylor
- A few other readings which are not required for this particular assignment but were included on the syllabus and inform its aims include:
  - The History Makers, [“The Crisis in Black Archives”](#)

- Edwards, Suzanne M. [“About Gloria Naylor”](#)
- Saidiya Hartman. “Venus in Two Acts”

# Appendix A: Sample Assignment Sheet

## Assignment: A Reader's Personal Archive

### WHAT I Am Asking You To Do – and WHY:

For this assignment, you will collect, describe, and reflect on documentary records that speak to *your own* reading of each of the novels in Gloria Naylor's quartet: *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills*, *Mama Day*, and *Bailey's Café*.

The learning goals of this assignment are twofold:

- **To *experiment with and cultivate* an expansive research practice that approaches a primary literary text through a variety of interpretive contexts.**

This inspiration for this self-reflective reading practice comes from Salamishah Tillet's *In Search of The Color Purple*, in which she reads Alice Walker's masterpiece (which won the National Book Award in the same year as Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*) through various lenses—her own life story, personal interviews with Alice Walker, her visits to physical settings connected the novel, Walker's biography, documents from Walker's Archive at Emory University (letters, photographs, journal entries, talks), Walker's other novels and essays, critical responses to the novel, contemporary popular culture, related literary works like Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and historical events. Just as Tillet carefully triangulates *Walker* as a reader/writer, *herself* as a reader/writer, and *others* as readers of Walker to build a reading of the novel, your personal archive will help you begin to develop a stronger sense of yourself as a reader in relation to Gloria Naylor's novels.

- **To reflect critically on the creation and description of archival documents—and, more broadly, on what is illuminated and what is obscured by how we structure evidence and categories of knowledge.**

In technical terms, archival records are “representations of activities, created by participants or observers of those activities or by their authorized proxies.” More simply, they are evidence of a particular action, undertaken by a particular person or group of people, in a particular time and place. For this assignment, you will think carefully and creatively about what might serve as an archival record of an action that is sometimes *invisible* (reading) and to create descriptive metadata about those

records. In creating descriptive metadata for your records, you will make implicit claims about *what* and *who* your records are evidence *for*.

### **WHEN—Due Dates:**

- February 17, 2023 – *The Women of Brewster Place*
- March 3, 2023 – *Linden Hills*
- March 31, 2023 – *Mama Day*
- Friday April 28 – *Bailey’s Café*

### **HOW—Each Reader’s Personal Archive has Three Related Components:**

#### **I. Records of Your Process and Experience as a Reader:**

You will create *up to 5* documentary records of your reading of the novel. These records testify to the ways in which you made sense of the novel as you read. This is an opportunity to think creatively about the experiences, practices, and resources that inform your interpretation of a literary work. To get you started, here’s a preliminary list of ideas. You can also use your reading of *In Search of the Color Purple* and your exploration of the records in the Gloria Naylor Archive as inspiration. (*Think*: How does Naylor document her own reading and research practices?)

- A photograph of yourself reading the novel.
- A photograph of what you see from where you’re reading the novel.
- A photograph of something you see that, for you, connects with the novel. For instance, you might take a trip to some of the locations referenced in *The Women of Brewster Place* or *Mama Day*.
- A newspaper or magazine story that you connect with the novel.
- A historical document that you connect with the novel—a contemporaneous review; a recording of a song mentioned in the novel; an archival photograph of, for example, an apartment building like the one in *Women of Brewster Place*; historical documents about urban development and gentrification in Bethlehem, etc.
- A reading from another class that you connect with the novel.
- Your annotations on a passage from the novel (handwritten, typed, etc).
- A personal journal entry.
- A letter that you write or receive that you connect with the novel.
- A photocopy of an article—perhaps a scholarly essay about the novel or an historical article about a topic in the novel—with handwritten annotations.

- A document from the Naylor Archive. (You can use professionally digitized images from the website or take your own photos.)
- Notes from a class discussion.
- An audio or video recording of you—or someone else—reading a passage from the novel.
- An audio or video recording of you talking about the novel—or a topic related to the novel—with a friend. (Be sure to get permission to record!)
- A drawing of a scene from the novel.
- A list of quotations from the novel and/or related works (handwritten or typed).
- An annotated/edited draft of the essay you’re submitting with your archival records.

## II. Metadata About Each Record in Your Personal Archive

*[NOTE: We prepared for this portion of the assignment with an in-class activity for which students generated metadata for items in the Naylor Archive; I chose items from the digital archive that emphasized the interpretive work of metadata creation.]*

For each record, you will create metadata—standardized descriptive terms for characterizing the item. Remember that creating metadata is a kind of *interpretive work*. Contextualize each record with:

- a **title**
- a **date** that the record was created
- the **creator** (person(s) or entity(ies) primarily responsible for the creation of the record)
- a **description** what the record
- the **subject(s)** or **topic(s)** of the record
- the type or format of the record (see this [list](#) of common archival format types)
  - Note: In some cases, you may wish to submit a “surrogate item.” For instance, your record might be a handwritten pages of notes—but instead of submitting the original, you might take a photograph or scan. For our purposes, you should list the format of the archival record—even if you’re turning in a “surrogate.”

## III. Written Reflection

In a 1000-1500 word written essay, explain how the archival records you have assembled inform your interpretation of the novel. Use these records to anchor a reading of the novel. Your reading of the novel can take many different forms, depending on what interests you as you compile your archive.

- Perhaps your records focus on key passages (an annotation of a passage, an audio recording of a passage, and a passage from Naylor’s handwritten draft); in that case, your records might be pointing you toward a traditional argument grounded in close readings.
- Perhaps your records emphasize current events that you connect with Naylor’s novels (a newspaper clipping from the campus newspaper, a video clip from a nationally syndicated news show, and a recorded conversation with a friend about that issue); in that case, your records might be pointing you toward a reading of the novel that explores what Naylor’s fiction contributes to our understanding of this contemporary issue.
- Perhaps your records speak to Naylor’s biography (photographs of Brooklyn College when she was there, a copy of a paper that she wrote for her class on Dante, and a letter she wrote to her sister). In that case, your records might point you toward a paper that explores how Naylor’s biography leads you to read the novel differently.
- Perhaps your records speak to the reception of Naylor’s novel (a copy of a letter from a fan, a scholarly article from 2020, and clippings of reviews from 1982). In that case, your paper might offer a *reception history* of the novel—how have readers responded differently to the novel at different moments since its publication?
- Perhaps your records emphasize your own life story (a journal entry, an inventory of books on your bookshelf, and a photograph of your family). In that case, your paper might reflect on how your own experiences shape your reading of the novel.

Be creative! The point here is to start to develop a *reading and writing process* that experiments with and reflects on the different interpretive lenses you bring to your reading of a literary work.