



Gloria Naylor Archival Exhibition

Key words: Gloria Naylor, archives, exhibition, Black feminisms

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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 As we read, we investigated how the extensive research materials, correspondence, diary entries, unpublished creative works, and early drafts of published novels in her archive can inform our interpretations.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 the "Gloria Naylor Archive Artifact Presentation" assignment helped students present a single artifact they found in the archive in the context of Gloria Naylor's biography, career, and times, this activity is useful to assign after such a presentation as a way to build a number of their archival searches out into a larger scale, narrativized exhibit for outside audiences. If you don't do the "Gloria Naylor Archive Artifact Presentation" before this exhibition assignment, another type of scaffolded assignment to build toward the larger exhibition would be helpful to students.

Activities/Handouts/Discussion Questions:

- **Learning Outcomes:**
 - Develop a coherent narrative out of fragmentary archival documents.
 - Annotate archival documents, a skill that requires recognizing what you (and your intended audience) do not know about references in the document, what you *cannot* know, and what you can figure out by turning to historical records and other authors' archives.
 - Articulate your methodological commitments in relation to critical archive studies and Black feminist thought.
 - Address audiences with different kinds of background knowledge.
- **Task:** Create an exhibition of 10-15 artifacts from the Gloria Naylor Archive that give insight into an aspect of Naylor's life or works. The exhibit must include:
 - A title and introduction (500 words) that explicates the theme that guided your selection of archival artifacts. The audience for this is a visitor to the exhibition who does not know a lot about Gloria Naylor.
 - Captions with a title, creator, and date for each of the 10-15 artifacts in your exhibition. The audience for this is a visitor to the exhibition who does not know a lot about Gloria Naylor.

- A brief explanatory note (150-200 words) for each of the 10-15 objects in your collection. The explanatory note should give the audience for your exhibition a good sense of *what* the artifact is and *how* it contributes to the story the exhibition as a whole is telling. The audience for this is a visitor to the exhibition who does not know a lot about Gloria Naylor.
- A critical introduction (1000-1500 words) that: 1) explains your vision for the exhibition (where would you want to see it installed? what kinds of programming will go along with it?); 2) explains your principles of selection (how did you decide what artifacts to include? what artifacts did you have to leave out and why?); and 3) reflects on the methodologies in critical archive studies and Black feminist theory that shape your selection and interpretation of artifacts in your exhibition. The audience for this is the members of this class, who are well versed in the materials.
- **Purpose:** This activity helps you deep-dive into some of the many archival fragments you've been looking at in the Naylor Archive and formulate them into a cohesive argument/narrative. By digging deeper into one object this way, you can better understand what you are looking at, its context, how it connects to the course as a whole, and how to describe its significance to other audiences, even beyond this course.
- **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, principles of selection, the clear narrative or argument their exhibition progressed, and the thoughtfulness behind their programming. For more detailed discussions of these criteria as well as an example I provided them with for reference on how to do the project, see the end of Appendix A.

Contextual Materials/Resources/Further Reading:

- [The Gloria Naylor Archive](#)
- [Gloria Naylor Other Places Exhibit](#) (on Storymaps)
- 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: Archival Exhibition

What We're Asking You To Do:

Create an exhibition of 10-15 artifacts from the Gloria Naylor Archive that give insight into an aspect of Naylor's life or works.

Your exhibition will include:

- A title and introduction (500 words) that explicates the theme that guided your selection of archival artifacts. The audience for this is a visitor to the exhibition who does not know a lot about Gloria Naylor.
- Captions with a title, creator, and date for each of the 10-15 artifacts in your exhibition. The audience for this is a visitor to the exhibition who does not know a lot about Gloria Naylor.
- A brief explanatory note (150-200 words) for each of the 10-15 objects in your collection. The explanatory note should give the audience for your exhibition a good sense of *what* the artifact is and *how* it contributes to the story the exhibition as a whole is telling. The audience for this is a visitor to the exhibition who does not know a lot about Gloria Naylor.
- A critical introduction (1000-1500 words) that: 1) explains your vision for the exhibition (where would you want to see it installed? what kinds of programming will go along with it?); 2) explains your principles of selection (how did you decide what artifacts to include? what artifacts did you have to leave out and why?); and 3) reflects on the methodologies in critical archive studies and Black feminist theory that shape your selection and interpretation of artifacts in your exhibition. The audience for this is the members of this class, who are well versed in the materials.

Why We're Asking You To Do This:

This assignment allows you to practice several skills important for making an argument rooted in archival records. You will:

- Develop a coherent narrative out of fragmentary archival documents.
- Annotate archival documents, a skill that requires recognizing what you (and your intended audience) do not know about references in the document, what you *cannot* know, and what you can figure out by turning to historical records and other authors' archives.
- Articulating your methodological commitments in relation to critical archive studies and Black feminist thought.
- Addressing audiences with different kinds of background knowledge.

How To Do This (Some Tips):

- Be creative! Even though you'll be pulling together your exhibition in a digital file, the ultimate form you dream for your exhibition is up to you—you can imagine presenting the artifacts and your introduction as a webpage or you can envision a gallery exhibition or a publication for secondary teachers of Naylor's work. One of our students envisioned creating a model of Bailey's Cafe where people could gather, eat, and view archival artifacts on the walls. Another student envisioned a community garden modeled on the plants in *Mama Day*. Your critical introduction should make clear how the *ultimate form* of your exhibition reflects your aspirations and audience for the mock-up at hand—and how it's grounded in your methodological commitments.
- Set clear principles of selection. There is *so* much material in the archive, so part of the challenge of this assignment is how to narrow down your choices. We have had students focus their exhibition on artifacts related to a particular novel; on Naylor's correspondence with other late-twentieth-century writers; on a particular *type* of material in the archive (including a memorable exhibition on pieces of seemingly inscrutable, fragmentary, one-page notes); on a particular year in Naylor's life, etc.
- Make sure that your exhibition advances a clear narrative and/or argument. How are the artifacts linked? And what do we learn from seeing them arranged in the way that you are presenting them?
- Remember that programming is an important part of your exhibition. For example, for the *Gloria Naylor: Other Places* exhibition, we invited a teaching artist to lead middle school students from South Bethlehem in drawing their own maps of communities where they live or that they imagine (after they viewed the exhibition and Naylor's own hand-drawn maps of Linden Hills and Willow Springs); then, in their classrooms, students wrote stories about those places.
- For a sample exhibition, see the digital exhibition *Gloria Naylor: Other Places* [here](#). Note that the format of this exhibition is similar to what we're asking you to do, but the *scope* of this exhibition is much larger (with more than 30 archival artifacts).