



Gloria Naylor Archive Artifact Presentation

Keywords: Gloria Naylor, archives, exhibition, Black feminisms

Teaching Materials Developed by: Suzanne Edwards, Lehigh University, and Mary C. Foltz, Lehigh University

Adapted by: Alice Martin, Rutgers University

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 As we read, we investigated how the extensive research materials, correspondence, diary entries, unpublished creative works, and early drafts of published novels in her archive can inform our interpretations.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 assignment helps students present a single artifact they found in the archive in the context of Gloria Naylor's biography, career, and times, it is also meant to help scaffold the "Gloria Naylor Archival Exhibition" activity, which is useful to assign after this presentation as a way to build a number of their archival searches out into a larger scale, narrativized exhibit for outside audiences.

Activities/Handouts/Discussion Questions:

- **Learning Outcomes:**
 - Explore an archive to identify material of interest
 - Describe and contextualize an archival artifact
 - Connect archival artifacts to larger interpretive issues about Naylor's published works, her biography, her writing process, and/or her readers.
- **Task:** Give a 10-minute presentation about an artifact from the archive that opens up new interpretive issues about the novel we've been discussing. (Alternatively, you can present a record that's more generally related to Naylor's biography or to an unpublished work that's not on the syllabus.) Your presentation should:
 - describe the artifact (in both material form and intellectual content)
 - contextualize the artifact in the archive
 - contextualize it in Naylor's literary career and/or biography
 - identify other relevant documents (whether in the archive or not)
 - identify an interpretive issue about the novel we're reading that these materials raise and facilitate a group discussion of them

- **Purpose:** Here, you can explore one archival find to better understand it and the context in which it was created/circulated. In short, the presentation gives you a chance to practice the basic building blocks of literary archival research, in advance of a final project where you'll be building an exhibition of archival records (see "Gloria Naylor Archival Exhibition").
- **Criteria:** Describe the artifact's criteria for each major activity included in the artifact. List the characteristics of the finished product/s in student-friendly language, including different examples of how the product might come together. These characteristics should be able to give the student some idea of how the assignment/activity/lesson will be graded or assessed.
- **Grading/Criteria:** 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 attentiveness to where and how it was located in the archive (and what the significance of that for the object might be), the research and other artifacts consulted in their contextualizations, and their effectiveness and engaging others in group discussion. For more detailed discussions of these criteria, see the end of Appendix A.

Contextual Materials/Resources/Further Reading:

- [The Gloria Naylor Archive](#)
- 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: Archive Artifact Presentation

What I'm Asking You To Do:

Give a 10-minute presentation about an artifact from the archive that opens up new interpretive issues about the novel we've been discussing. (Alternatively, you can present a record that's more generally related to Naylor's biography or to an unpublished work that's not on the syllabus.) Your presentation should:

- describe the artifact (in both material form and intellectual content)
- contextualize the artifact in the archive
- contextualize it in Naylor's literary career and/or biography
- identify other relevant documents (whether in the archive or not)
- identify an interpretive issue about the novel we're reading that these materials raise and facilitate a group discussion of them

Your presentation is an opportunity for you to share something that you find interesting in the archive and to get group feedback about the interpretive possibilities your questions open up.

Why I'm Asking You To Do This:

This assignment gives you a chance to practice: 1) exploring an archive to identify material of interest; 2) describing and contextualizing an archival artifact; and 3) connecting archival artifacts to larger interpretive issues about Naylor's published works, her biography, her writing process, and/or her readers.

In short, the presentation gives you a chance to practice the basic building blocks of literary archival research, in advance of a final project where you'll be building an exhibition of archival records.

A Few Tips on How To Do This:

- Plan your visit to the archive by consulting the finding aid in advance. Be prepared to let the archivist know what box you'd like to consult first. **[NOTE: This can be tweaked for students in other institutions by directing them to [the Gloria Naylor Archive](#) online.]**

- While the finding aid is a useful starting place for your research, you should also remember that it's a document that should itself be read with a critical eye. So, think creatively. If you're interested in *The Women of Brewster Place*, of course the box with the same title will immediately suggest itself, but material connected to *The Women of Brewster Place* will also be found elsewhere in the archive—in correspondence, in engagements, in financial records.
- Remember that not only the content of an artifact—what it says—but also its material form can be significant. Your presentation should describe both, and where possible, explain what the material form tells you. For instance, let's say that you're looking at manuscript draft with handwritten comments. Do you know who wrote the handwritten comments? How do you know? Are the handwritten comments by one writer? Or by more than one? How do you know? Is the manuscript draft typed, printed, or xeroxed? Or, let's say that you're looking at correspondence. Are there enclosures? Is it on business letterhead or on personal stationery? Is it typed or handwritten? Is there any indication or where the letter was sent from? Your presentation only needs to highlight the material details that you think are important, but to arrive at those, you'll need to think through a close reading of the artifact's material form.
- The location of the artifact in the collection may also help you to interpret it. In this collection, most of the folders and folder titles are as the collection was received by Sacred Heart University from Gloria Naylor in 2009. So, if you're looking at a folder of research materials for *Linden Hills*, for example, you might want to consider what other research materials are collected in adjacent folders. How are the research materials, in general, organized? Are they organized by topic? By sections of the novel? What types of materials are grouped together?
- To contextualize an artifact, you may need to do more research. Who are the people referenced in the artifact? What biographical information can you find out about them? What institutions are referenced in the artifact, and what information can you find out about the history of those institutions? What is the date of the artifact? What was going on in Naylor's life at that time? There are other ways to think about context as well. For instance, let's say you're looking at the contract that gives Gloria Naylor \$1500 for *The Women of Brewster Place*, you might want to know what Viking Press typically offered first-time novelists in 1982. Was this a standard amount, or above/below the market rate?
- To contextualize an artifact, you may need to search for other artifacts in the archive—or in other databases. For example, to contextualize Naylor's letter to a fan, I needed to find the article in *Essence* referenced in their correspondence.
- Finally, consider these tips for asking good questions for group discussion:
 - Frame your question with a premise. The interpretive issue that you want to highlight should be clear to your audience; you're looking for a discussion that's focused on a single interpretive issue, without inviting a single response.

- Ask a genuinely open-ended question, one with multiple possible answers. Avoid a yes-no question, embrace *why*, *how*, and *in what ways*.
- Ask a question that asks people to make connections among different texts, passages, and/or contexts.
- Be prepared with different ways of asking the same question. Don't be afraid to repeat your question with a difference—or even without one.
- Be prepared with a passage from the archival artifact or from the novel you're pairing with it, in case your open-ended question meets with blank stares. Or, ask your audience to identify a passage that strikes them as relevant to the question.
- Ask one question at a time, to leave space for discussion. At the same time, be prepared with follow-up questions.