

SEEING ONESELF TO SEE OTHERS: THE PERSONAL ARCHIVE ASSIGNMENT

2021 SAA Research Forum

Session 2.6: Pandemic Innovation

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OUR RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do archivists introduce students to the power and potential of archives when all classes are conducted online and there is limited access to physical archival materials?

How do archivists and their faculty partners foster virtual community so that students can engage meaningfully with archival concepts?

OUR GOALS

- Center student **identities** and introduce the idea that **archives are political and personal**
- Introduce the concept of **symbolic annihilation**, as it manifests in the archive (Caswell)
- Keep this assignment and our facilitation rooted in **engaged pedagogy** (hooks)



**ENGAGED
PEDAGOGY**

FROM BELL
HOOKS'
*TEACHING TO
TRANSGRESS*

“...progressive, holistic education, **‘engaged pedagogy’** is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it **emphasizes well-being**. That means that teacher must be actively committed to a process of **self-actualization** that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that **empowers students**.”

THE PERSONAL ARCHIVE ASSIGNMENT (PAA)

- First created for use in the **fully-online (asynchronous)** Fall 2020 Classroom
- Introductory-level Ethnic Studies classrooms
- Calls for students to explore their positionality
 - In the present moment
 - Within the larger scope of “History”
- Students create their own “Papers”
 - Students identify and create metadata for 10 items
 - Reflective prompts at Midterm and Final

Personal Archive Assignment

Assignment created by [Dr. Krista Grensavitch, Ph.D.](#) and [Abbi Nye, MLIS.](#)

Overview

This semester-long, scaffolded assignment empowers students by asking them to assemble a Personal Archive (PA) that documents their experience/s during 2020, including but not limited to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests, which in this current iteration, responded to members of law enforcement murdering George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless other BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color).

Along with helping students record and critically engage with their lived reality, this assignment has several purposes:

- To help students explore what an archive is, understand how archives are political, and that archives are often the product of heteronormative, patriarchal, white supremacist institutions
- To introduce the concept of symbolic annihilation –and then imagine how creating a personal archive can counter systemic forces that silence, erase, deny, and minimize
- To help students develop an understanding of intersectional analysis, utilizing it as a lens to interrogate mass movement, other, and self
- To build radical empathy -both in and out of the classroom



Personal Archive Prompt #1: Self Portrait

Before completing this prompt, be sure you have reviewed the [Personal Archive Assignment Sheet](#) and watched the [Video Introduction: Personal Archive Assignment](#)

Prompt 1

Prompt 1 asks you to identify a **self portrait** to include in your PA. This can be a self portrait (or selfie, even) taken recently, or one that you take especially for this prompt. You're even welcome to draw or paint a self portrait. Mark for yourself (and your viewer) who you are and what you look like in this moment.

Why a Self Portrait?

Self portraits and portraits have a long, visual history of communicating complex and multiple meanings about the subject (you!) With this in mind, think carefully about what is communicated in the image you take/choose:

- What medium is this in - photo, painting, drawing? How does that impact how people receive and view the image?
- Are you looking at the camera/viewer? Away? How could this be interpreted by the viewer?
- What items (special clothing, accessories, furniture, etc.) are present in the frame? Are there meaning/s associated with the objects?
- Are there other people in the image? What is the relationship that links the people in the image?
- Where was this image taken, and by whom? What meanings do these choices lend to the image?

The answers to these questions should help you compose the description of the item.

After you create/identify your image, follow the directions under the heading [How to Complete Personal Archive (PA) Prompts] in the [Personal Archive Assignment Sheet](#)

Due date: Personal Archive items 1-5 are due in Week 8 of the semester. Of course, you are welcome to create this item anytime from now until then; you will just submit items 1-5 as a group as the first 'installment' of your papers in Week 8.

Example from the Archives

The [Milwaukee Polonia Collection](#) [↗] contains a number of portraits, many of them individual & family portraits.

RESULTS: EXAMPLES OF STUDENT WORK

Personal Archive item #3 – Article of Clothing



Item Description	
Title	Hmong Sev (Sh-ay)
Date	9/30/20
Creator	Jessica Her
Description/Notes	A side by side image of the creator mother's handmade, embroidered Hmong attire made for the creator. The focus is on the first image which is known as a sev and later created into a Hmong attire, the second image worn by creator. It was a piece of a Hmong attire made in the late 1990s before creator was born.
Subject	Hmong Sev Apron Handmade

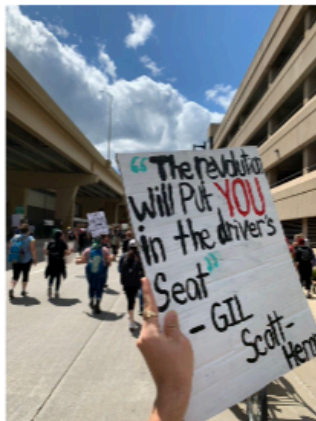
	Embroidery Culture New Year
Type	Fabric, cotton strings, fuzzy stings, color strands
Format	Still Digital image, taken on iPhone camera.
Language	English, Hmong
Rights	This image is the property Jessica Her, To obtain permission or use, contact her72@uwm.edu
Create a Prompt: People	Julia Her
Why did you include this item?	<p>I included this item because it is what represent my culture like stated in the Personal Archive #1. This piece of clothing is called a "sev," pronounced sh-ay. To simplify it in English, it is called an apron. It is worn around the waist down (refer to image 2).</p> <p>For the past years, I've been really into my Hmong heritage and roots. Awhile back, I went through my mother's old storage box full of her old embroideries and found a set of her handmade embroidery design known as "paj ntaub," that was made for me personally. It has been sitting in there since we moved, so she never had the time to fully sew the paj ntaub design into an attire until recently. I choose the sev or apron specifically because it is the biggest piece with the most embroidery on it. Like stated before, having a piece of an attire made from your loved ones is unconditionally meaningful because it defines their love and a piece to cherish. It's a design made from the love and thought of having a daughter.</p> <p>Back in the days, life in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and China, these clothes would be worn on a daily as their normal daily wear. Now days, the Hmong attires would be worn for photos, weddings for</p>

RESULTS: EXAMPLES OF STUDENT WORK

Personal Archive Assignment

Enzo DeMay

Item #5: Object That Represents Involvement in Present- Day Protest Movements.



Item Description	
Title	Protest Sign
Date	28 May 2020
Creator	Enzo DeMay
Description/Notes	Handmade protest sign with Gil Scott-Heron quote inscribed on both sides. Image was taken during the first initial few days of protests in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
Subject	Poetry Pan-Africanism Civil-Disobedience

	Music Gil Scott-Heron Quotation Painting The Last Poets The Revolution Will Not Be Televised The Revolution Will Not Go Better With Coke
Type	Cardboard. White, black, green, and red paint to symbolize the Pan-African flag.
Format	Still digital image, taken on an iPhone camera
Language	English
Rights	This image is the property of Enzo DeMay.
Create a Prompt: Colors	The colors of this sign were chosen with the intent purpose to align with the scheme of the Pan-African flag.
Why did you include this item?	<p>Gil Scott-Heron is a seminal figure in the late '60s civil rights era and is also a critically acclaimed musician and poet. Along with Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye, Scott-Heron brought a wave of political consciousness to soul music. Being an early adopter of a new wave of musical poetry, he mixed the wit and the irony of Blues-era lyrics with fast, swinging music that was volatile and in your face.</p> <p>His best-known work was "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" a protest track with a funky instrumental that played behind many social proclamations and observations. His music and words are intoxicating in the best way, and with the social turmoil that was again arising 50 years after that track was released, my mind instantly thought of him, and the black-arts group <i>The Last Poets</i>.</p>

Personal Archive Item #1: Self Portrait



INSTRUCTOR EXAMPLE

“I never ask students to do an...assignment that I am not willing to do. My willingness to share, to put my thoughts and ideas out there, attests to the importance of putting thoughts out there, of moving past fear or shame.

When we all take risks, we participate mutually in the work of creating a learning community”

(hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking*, 2009)

Item Description	
Title	Self Portrait of Instructor, Without and With Mask
Date	13 September 2020
Creator	Krista Grensavitch, PhD
Description/Notes	Side-by-side images of the subject, seated at a desk with paper and a pen in the foreground. In one image, the subject is wearing a mask.
Subject	University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Curtin Hall Universities & colleges Cis-Woman Teaching & Learning Pedagogy Facemask COVID-19

WHY WAS THIS ASSIGNMENT SO POWERFUL? (INSTRUCTOR PERSPECTIVE)

“The PAA pedagogy is transformative in the classroom. **It creates student-centered communities** that facilitate high order comprehension in the humanities and **facilitates the difficult conversations** so crucial to the work of cultural diversity classes.”

“I was stunned and gratified to find my Ethnic Studies 101 students in earnest conversation about questions of symbolic annihilation by the third week of the project. They recognized the importance of the term and used it in discussions elsewhere in the class; they were able to connect their work on the PAA to broad scholarly concerns in Comparative Ethnic Studies. In other words, **work on the PAA elevated the level of comprehension and subsequent analysis in the class, within a very short amount of time.** Further, the students reflected on their work in the PAA at the end of class. Almost unanimously, **they were surprised and pleased to find themselves not only understanding terms like ‘metadata,’ but directly engaged in creating it.**”

WHY WAS THIS ASSIGNMENT SO POWERFUL? (STUDENT PERSPECTIVE)

“This assignment has help me understand more things about myself that I don't often think about. I was able to reflect on previous events, reflect on past memories, and how life has changed me physically and mentally throughout the years. I never really express how I feel about myself or view things and **by doing this archive has made me more appreciative and accepting of myself and my environment.** These archives or probably this whole course has helped me open up on things that I've been holding it in for a long time.”

“The assignment helped me understand myself more because I had to actually think and write about events that have happened in my life. The assignment **helped me better understand what history is because I am writing the events of my life now, similarly to how other people have written about their lives at a given point in time.** History is fascinating because everyone has different perspectives of events they have lived through and understanding those points of view are important in going forward and learning from history.”

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- Personal Archive Assignment: <https://uwm.edu/libraries/archives/personal-archive-assignment/>
- Caswell, Michelle. "Seeing yourself in history: community archives and the fight against symbolic annihilation." *The Public Historian* 36.4 (2014): 26-37.
- Caswell, Michelle and Marika Cifor. "From human rights to feminist ethics: radical empathy in the archives." *Archivaria* 81, no. 1(2016): 23-43.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994)
- hooks, bell. *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (2009).
- Sentance, Nathan. "Your neutral is not our neutral." *Archival Decolonist*. 18 January 2018, <https://archivaldecolonist.com/2018/01/18/your-neutral-is-not-our-neutral/>.