

Introduction for Instructors: The 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 experiences living through the contemporaneous semester. At the time this assignment was created and first implemented, students lived through events 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

The PA assignment instructs students to first examine their own positionality – taking stock of and then critically reflecting on how they experience the world at their particular intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, class, etc. Then, students are asked to continue their critical reflection and identify (or imagine) if the particular set of identities they occupy are typically present in institutional repositories and archives – or if those identities are effectively symbolically annihilated.

Rooted in a developing understanding of how they are positioned in and thus view and operate in wider contexts, students will create a body of entries that constitutes their PA. A series of prompts guide student creation of the PA entries. These prompts ask students to examine their production, consumption, and interaction with artifacts and texts ranging from social media posts to emails and photographs.

Once the PA is assembled, students can complete a guided, critical reflection on their own PA. Additionally, students can extend this reflection and examine a classmate's PA, thus furthering the development of their primary source literacy and interpretation skills. In both exercises, students' reading and interpretation of primary sources depends on their developing understanding of the creator, audience, and other contextual information.

Instructor evaluation of student submissions can take many forms. However, the creators here advise that evaluation of student submissions and progress meeting intended learning outcomes should be rooted in abolitionist pedagogy and radical empathy, asking students and the instructor



alike to consider the top-down power structures that typically dictate assignment development, completion, and evaluation in higher education — and then subvert these normative practices. We advise that students and the instructor co-create a rubric that allows for a holistic (and, potentially, equitable) evaluation of student learning within the context of a pandemic (and just post-pandemic, we hope).

The creators of this assignment (Abigail Nye, MLIS, and Krista Grensavitch, Ph.D.) provide extensive pedagogical and practical support for both teachers and learners. The assignment, all prompts, supplementary media, and additional resources are all available through this website.

Intended Learning Outcomes

- Students will understand that authority is constructed and contextual (ACRL)
- Students will be able to distinguish between primary and secondary sources and understand their interrelated nature for research. (SAA/RBMS)
- Students will critically evaluate the perspective of the creator(s) of a primary source, including tone, subjectivity, and biases, and consider how these relate to the original purpose(s) and audience(s) of the source. (SAA/RBMS)
- Students will identify and communicate information found in primary sources, including summarizing the content of the source and identifying and reporting key components such as how it was created, by whom, when, and what it is. (SAA/RBMS)
- Students will develop an understanding of intersectional analysis, utilizing it as a lens to interrogate mass movement, other, and self.
- Students will build radical empathy in and out of the classroom.

Suggested Readings for Instructors

Caswell, Michelle. "Seeing yourself in history: community archives and the fight against symbolic annihilation." *The Public Historian* 36, no. 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.

<https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13557/14916>

Kelty, Shawna Mefferd. "We have lift-off: the pedagogy of radical empathy for first-year student success."

https://www.academia.edu/36980639/We_Have_Lift-Off_The_Pedagogy_of_Radical_Empathy_for_First-Year_Student_Success_A_Short_Preface_on_Hope_and_Grit_in_the_Process_of_Teaching_and_Learning.

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/>.

