

African American Studies 5A
Library Research Assignment
Fall 2006

Overview

As we have discussed in lecture, primary sources are the objects through which we can construct a narrative of African American history, life, and culture. In particular, the field of African American Studies is committed to interdisciplinary research that analyzes these primary sources by locating them within a complex web of social, historical, political, and economic contexts. Through this assignment, you will become an active researcher in the field of African American Studies, rather than simply a student of other scholars' research. You will move through the stages of a research project: formulating a research question, gathering information, analyzing and interpreting your information, and sharing your findings with your peers.

In this assignment, you will select a primary document and pose the following question:

**How does my chosen document contribute to the construction of
black culture and/or identity in America?**

On your way to answering this question you might consider the following:

- How is blackness defined in your document? Does this perpetuate or challenge existing definitions of blackness?
- How, if at all, does your document attempt to mobilize its audience for a specific political purpose?
- How does your document reflect, intervene and/or comment upon its historical moment?

Instructions and Due Dates

Because research is a sustained process of inquiry, you will complete this assignment in four steps over the course of the semester. Each step will be evaluated individually, and together these steps comprise 45% of your final grade in the course.

Due September 28: Identify and locate a primary document within the UC Berkeley library collection that you would like to research further. (Value: ungraded, but required before progressing to Step 2)

Due October 12: Create a bibliography of 5 secondary sources that explain the social, historical, and/or artistic context within which the primary document was produced. Write annotated entries for two of these sources. (Value: 10%)

Due November 7: Write a brief (4-6 page) analysis of one of your 5 bibliographic sources. (Value: 15%)

Due December 5: Write a longer (8-10 page) analysis of your primary document that makes a claim for its contributions to African American culture. (Value: 20%)

Each assignment is due in hard copy at the beginning of lecture at 11:10am. Please see the syllabus for lateness policies.

Step 1: Choosing your primary document

Choose a primary document from the UC Berkeley library collection that you believe helps in some way to define and/or construct black identity in America. For our purposes, primary documents include not just first-person narratives and official documents like newspapers and governmental records, but also a wide variety of cultural artifacts, such as video recordings, images (visual art, advertisements, film stills), songs (audio recordings, sheet music), performances, speeches, and sermons. (Note: this is not an exhaustive list. Please talk to the professor or your GSI if you are unsure about the suitability of your intended document.)

You may not choose a primary document from the course syllabus. Furthermore, the document you analyze must have been produced before the year of your birth. This will give you some historical distance from your document, and will enable you to think about the continuities between the definitions of blackness that we encounter today and those that were articulated and negotiated in earlier historical periods.

In a one-page write-up, please do the following:

- Produce a formal citation of the document, conforming to the Chicago Style Manual.
- Identify your document's location within the UCB library system (call number and specific library).
- Describe the access you have to your object of analysis: are you evaluating the original document, or a reproduction of that original document?
- Offer a working hypothesis that answers the question of how the document you have selected contributes to the construction of African American culture/identity. This hypothesis will (and should) change as you gather information, but it's important for you to begin gathering information with some idea of what thesis you're trying to support.

Sample Step 1 Assignment:

Primary Document:

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Maud Martha: a novel*. New York: Harper, 1953.

Location:

Bancroft Library, PS3503.R7244 M38

Access:

The Bancroft Library has a first edition copy of the book, which I have to make a special request to use, but there are later editions of the novel in Moffitt and Doe.

Working Hypothesis:

Maud Martha is an important novel that helps to construct African American identity by showing the different social forces that influence the development of black identity within American society. Additionally, it is important that Brooks focuses on a woman to describe the black community rather than a man, because this was not common in the 1950s.

Remember: although Step 1 is ungraded, you will not be allowed to proceed to Step 2 until your Step 1 assignment has been approved. Your GSI will evaluate your proposal to confirm that you have selected a primary document that will form the basis of a successful research project.

Step 2: Creating an annotated research bibliography

Part A: Now that you've had more time to spend thinking about your primary document, revise your working hypothesis so that it reflects your most current ideas. Then, read the handout "What to ask of a document" (available via bSpace). Decide which areas of focus (authorship, narrative voice, imagery, genre, plot, content, audience, material production, historical context) will help you to create the best argument in support of your working hypothesis. (You may also feel like revising your thesis for a third time, as you try to decide which areas of focus to explore). Consult with a reference librarian to compile a bibliography of 5 sources that will help you to gain some of this background context. For each source of your bibliography, indicate which area(s) of focus your source will help you to illuminate. You may use a variety of sources, but please observe the following rules:

- 1) Only one of your secondary sources may be a direct analysis of your primary document (e.g. "Domestic Epic Warfare in *Maud Martha*"). It can be helpful to see how other scholars have interpreted the same primary document that you will, but this should not be the focus of your research at this stage. (And of course, you don't have to choose this type of secondary source at all.)
- 2) Only one of your secondary sources may come from the course syllabus.
- 3) The internet is an amazing source of information, and much of it is accurate and very useful (and much of it is not: see the online handout about online research strategies to help you evaluate the reliability of possible research information). However, there are many research materials that have not yet been digitized that could still be very helpful to you. Therefore, at least two of your secondary sources must be in print (i.e. not digital) and available through the UC Berkeley library system. (Please consult the reference librarians or the instructor if you are unclear about these restrictions.)
- 4) Again, this bibliography should conform to the Chicago Style Manual, and should also provide the location within the UC Berkeley library collection (if appropriate).

Part B: By providing another level of detailed information, annotated bibliographies help researchers to prioritize information they encounter while trying to answer their questions. At this stage, you will select two of your five secondary sources, *read them*, and create annotated bibliographic entries for them. For each of these two secondary sources, provide the following information:

- What information does this secondary source provide?
- How will the information in this source help you to offer a careful reading of your primary document?

**As you compile your bibliography, look carefully at each of your sources, even those you don't formally annotate to make sure that these texts will be useful to you. Remember that the first five sources you discover may not be the best five sources for your research project. We will evaluate your bibliography for how well it relates to your working hypothesis and therefore prepares you to write the final analysis of your primary document.

Sample Step 2 Assignment

Old hypothesis:

Maud Martha is an important novel that helps to construct African American identity by showing the different social forces that influence the development of black identity within American society. Additionally, it is important that Brooks focuses on a woman to describe the black community rather than a man, because this was not common in the 1950s.

Revised hypothesis:

Maud Martha is an early example of black feminist literature, because it shows how racism and sexism combine to make its protagonist feel like a second-class citizen. Gwendolyn Brooks suggests that we need to pay more attention to the black woman and her struggle within American society.

Annotated Bibliography

Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism: perspectives on Black women writers*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1985. [Location: Moffitt, PS153.N5 C47 1985] **Area of focus: authorship**

Christian's book identifies themes and strategies that unite Black women writers, and offers analyses of specific writers, including Alice Walker. This book will help me to analyze Brooks's novel by providing a context for understanding the significance of her authorship as a black woman, the narrative voice she employs, and also by providing a socio-political context for appreciating the novel's place within black culture.

Frazier, Valerie. "Domestic Epic Warfare in *Maud Martha*." *African American Review*, 39 (2005): 133-141. [Location: Main, PS153.N5 B55] **Area of focus: plot, content, authorship**

Hirsch, Arnold. *Making the Second Ghetto: race and housing in Chicago 1940-1960*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998. [Location: Environmental Design, HD7288.72.U52.C454 1998] **Area of focus: historical context**

Hirsch's book describes the conditions that blacks endured living in Chicago during the period in which *Maud Martha* is set: it describes the racism that blacks fought against, and the role of the government in perpetuating inequality. This book will help me to understand the social conditions that made *Maud Martha* so angry, and will help me to understand whether *Maud Martha* challenges the representation and/or definitions of blackness that were current at that time.

Lerner, Gerda, ed. *Black Women in White America: a documentary history*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992. [Location: Moffitt, E185.86.B5436 1992] **Area of focus: historical context**

Russell, Kathy, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall. *The Color Complex: the politics of skin color among African Americans*. New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1992. [Location: Main, E185.625.A78 1992] **Area of focus: plot, historical context**

Step 3: Analysis of Secondary Literature

This step in the research process will give you an opportunity to engage more deeply with your secondary material. It's important that you learn to digest other scholars' work in ways that help you to figure out your own ideas. Putting your understanding of others' work into your own words is essential to developing a strong critical perspective that will prepare you for the final step of the research process. It's also important that you begin cultivating your academic writing skills well before the final paper is due.

For this short (4-6 page) paper, select one of the 3 bibliographic entries that you did not already annotate, and one that does not offer direct analysis of your chosen primary document, and offer a careful analysis of the writing. If you select an essay or web page, analyze it in its entirety; if you choose a book, focus on the introductory chapter of the book (unless another chapter is more specifically useful to your research). In your analysis, please address the following:

- What is the author's thesis?
- What evidence does the author employ to support this thesis?
- Who is the intended audience for this scholarship (experts, general audience, etc.)?
- In your opinion, does the author succeed in making his/her argument? If not, why not?

In this paper, you will be doing both analytical and persuasive writing. Not only must you explain the information contained in your secondary source, you must also offer an assessment of your source's merits. When conducting research, it is quite common to encounter information that you strongly disagree with. This isn't a bad thing: knowing which scholars you disagree with can be as important to the development of your research as knowing which scholars you admire. Therefore, you may choose to write about a source that you find completely inspiring, or you may choose to write about a source that you believe has problems, but in either case, you must support your opinions with evidence. Remember to continue to use the Chicago Style to cite your use of references within the essay.

We will evaluate this paper for the clarity of your writing style (thesis, organization, use of evidence, grammar, etc.) and your ability to explain and defend (or critique) the merits of the text.

Step 4: Analysis of the primary document

Now that you have studied the context within which your document was produced, you are ready to answer the question, “How does my chosen document participate in the construction of black culture and/or identity in America?” The answer to this question will be your thesis, and the purpose of this paper is to prove your thesis. This will be the final revision of the working hypothesis that you’ve been developing while conducting your research.

Reread the handout “What to ask of a document.” Using it as your guide, combine evidence from the primary document itself with evidence from your secondary sources to develop your argument. Remember that your 8-10 page paper needs to be focused, rather than trying to address too many issues. There are many ways to answer the question of how your document helps to define and/or construct black identity, but you must choose one and stick with it throughout your paper. Doing so will also cause you to prioritize your engagement with the various elements of the work (authorship, narrative voice, imagery, genre, plot, content, audience, material production, and historical context).

As you complete this final paper, you may want to conduct a bit more research: sometimes, a secondary source that looked great in the library isn’t as helpful when you sit down to read it in full; or you might discover that you need a little more information than you currently have on an area of focus that is useful to your argument. You will need to include a bibliography with your final paper, so be sure to list all of the sources that you use to write your paper, not just the original five that you submitted in Step 3. (And remember, again, to create citations for the words and/or ideas of others whenever they appear within your paper.)

Lastly, scholars share their work with one another in a variety of ways; writing is only one of them. Oral presentations are another important way that researchers share new ideas. In addition to writing your final analysis of the primary document, you will give a brief (no more than 5 minutes) oral presentation of your research process within your discussion section. Students will be randomly assigned to present at various stages within the research process. This presentation is mandatory, but will not be formally graded outside of your regular discussion section participation.

We will evaluate your final paper for the clarity of your writing style, the originality of your argument, and your ability to integrate ideas from your primary and secondary sources to produce a careful, thoughtful paper that answers the question posed by the assignment.

A few final pointers:

- If you have questions at any point in the process, do not hesitate to discuss them with the professor or your GSI. We want to help you do excellent work.
- Please observe all formatting, lateness, and academic integrity policies outlined in the course syllabus.
- Enjoy the process! Research is an exciting process of discovery: the UC Berkeley library collection is quite impressive, so take advantage of it.

WHAT TO ASK OF A DOCUMENT

Adapted from Jean-Christophe Agnew, "What to Ask of a Document," Yale University, 2003

In this assignment, you will be expected to analyze texts as documents of African American social and cultural history. You must select some aspect of the document(s) around which to build a clear and well-supported historical argument. That argument, in turn, should show what the documents reveal about the social and cultural context in which they were created and/or published: (a) about the authors, (b) about the readers or audiences for whom they thought themselves to be composing their work, and (c) about the common, often unstated assumptions that guided the authors' decisions over what and how to write. To work your way through to an understanding of those assumptions is to grasp the cultural values that shape an author's content and form; or to put it another way, to grasp the orientation that inspires and authorizes a writer to write about one thing rather than another, and to write about it in one way rather than another. The same applies to other media, like photography, painting, music, and so forth.

Once you have a sense of the historical and cultural orientation shaping a particular document -- whether diary, poem, novel, video, speech, photograph, songsheet, etc. -- don't lose sight of the author, for writers are rarely the helpless victims or prisoners of their culture: they can experiment, mock, and even subvert the literary (artistic, musical, etc) conventions or traditions in which they write, and they can do so in a manner that, like babies or mechanical inventions, brings something new into the world. The more documents you get under your belt, the easier it will be to appreciate the cultural limits under which these authors operated and the measure in which they were ready and able to expand them. But in more modest ways, many of the authors you will be reading were playing with, or at least thinking about, what was and what was not *permissible* to say and do in their society. And in doing that for themselves, they have much to tell us. As part of your presentation, you are asked to discuss just what we can learn such documents.

Here is an annotated checklist of questions to bring to the cultural artifact reading. They are intended to prepare you for discussion and to help you develop ideas for papers. The papers themselves need not, and probably should not, follow the order of questions in precisely this order.

(1) **AUTHORSHIP:** Who is the author of the document? What do you know or what can you find out about the social location of the author -- where, quite literally, he or she is coming from? Is the author someone who could plausibly expect an attentive and respectful reading by his or her audience, or is the person someone fighting to be heard? Is it someone who occupies a secure social niche, or someone straddling or mediating between classes, races, ethnicities -- in a word, cultures? Can you read off the author's social power (or lack of it) from the way in which the text is composed, or does the document try to mask, mute, or otherwise ignore the class, race, ethnicity, gender, or regional background of its creator? Why?

(2) **NARRATIVE VOICE:** Is the narrator or narrative voice in the document distinguishable from that of the author, as the author has become known to you in answering question #1? If that voice does not precisely square with what you otherwise know of the author, how might you explain the gap? For what purposes or effects has the author created the narrative voice(s) at work in the text? What sort of language is being used? Is it flowery and complex, or simple and concrete? Is it active and direct, or passive and oblique? Is it personal or impersonal? Sometimes, as in a diary for example, a writer may not be aware as, say, a novelist, of the narrative voice he or she deploys, yet you as a reader may detect echoes of narrative styles unwittingly "borrowed" from novels, magazines, and other genres. This is a much more difficult influence to unearth in a text, requiring as it does a familiarity with other kinds of contemporaneous writing. That is why we have assigned so many different kinds of expression: the cross-fertilization can yield some rich insights into cultural history.

(3) **IMAGERY:** While you are thinking about narrative voice, look more closely at the figurative dimension of the document: the metaphors, similes, and other rhetorical devices the author uses to render his or her narrative or argument vivid, compelling, or even commonplace. What is the effect of this imagery? What kind of work do these images do in the text?

(4) **GENRE:** What is the genre that the author has chosen to express his or her message? Why do you think the author has chosen this genre (for example, poem vs. literary essay, documentary film vs. narrative fiction, candid photograph vs. painting, R&B vs. rap song, etc.) and not another one? Are there certain issues that the genre allows the author to address, or to exclude? Or to address in a particular way? What would have been gained or lost had the author chosen, or been required to choose, a different genre: a different form of exposition?

(5) **PLOT:** Almost every document tries to tell a story, or stories. What kind of story is it? romantic, comic, tragic, ironic, etc? Could different audiences have read different plots and lessons out of the same text? Can you break down the story into a sequence of cause and effects, or does the story resist that logic? (Or, can you break down a painting, photographic, or a piece of music into its compositional elements?) Is there an argument embedded in the narrative, and, conversely, is there a story or narrative buried in what might otherwise appear to be a mere argument, as in, say, a legal brief or political manifesto?

(6) **CONTENT:** What, then, is the document saying? Taking all the formal strategies of the text into consideration -- voice, imagery, genre, plot, etc. -- what is the author telling his or her audience(s) about the world he or she inhabits? What are the most prominent themes in the document? How are they connected to one another, and with what effect? How do the document's explicit and implicit statements about the world square with what you have learned from other sources: readings, discussion, outside sources, etc? If the document departs from what you otherwise know of the world it describes, how would you account for this?

(7) AUDIENCE: Now, think beyond the document -- to the imagined space occupied by the author's readers or viewers or listeners. Using all the clues you've gleaned from the form and content of the document, who do you believe was the intended audience for the text? Did the author expect to be read, heard, or seen by the elite of society, or by a broader audience? By women and/or men? By whites and/or blacks? By a local, national or international readership? Do you detect the pressures of self-censorship? Do you suspect the presence of a subtext aimed at a subset of the expected audience? How do you think the text might have been received by its expected audience? by those for whom it was not intended?

(8) MATERIAL PRODUCTION: How was the text originally produced? Was it published? Performed? If so, where and how? How was it disseminated? What sort of economic and/or political pressures might have contributed to its final form? Could the way in which the document was produced and distributed have led to audience interpretations quite different from those you suspect were intended by the author?

(9) HISTORICAL CONTEXT: Finally, at the broadest level of interpretation, how does this source (as you read it) square with other documents and information you have learned about the period from the readings? How does the document describe, grapple with, or ignore contemporaneous events? What cultural myths and ideologies are endorsed or challenged -- loudly or quietly -- by the author, or painter, or composer, or director, etc? Question #9 thus returns us to question #1.

The number of questions listed above can seem quite daunting, but you can see that though they overlap, they do group together reasonably well under the *nine* rubrics. And the habit of bringing those nine general categories of questions to bear upon the documents in this course will simplify the process over the course of the semester. Actually, what may seem at first different and disorienting is our expectation that you ask so many questions about form (#2,3,4,5) before getting to content. The categories are arranged in this way to remind ourselves that authors must choose a voice in which to speak, a genre in which to write, a sequence (plot, etc.) in which to order the details, and metaphor and imagery in which to bring home their points. These decisions are not simply matters of style or ornamentation, to be stripped away by the historian in order to get at the nitty-gritty "facts" or content. To the contrary, these choices provide the interpretive frame without which the author's details would make no sense whatsoever. The real, interdisciplinary challenge of your presentations -- as of your discussions -- will be to look at an author's formal choices as equally subject to historical analysis as his or her choices of subject matter or political posture. To read and write cultural history is to realize, first and foremost, that all documents are more than the record of human acts. They are acts themselves.