

ARH 390: Race, Photography, and America
Fall 2020

Course Objectives: Our objectives for this course are: 1) to develop visual literacy with the complex processes and social functions of photographic images, and these images' often-unstable status as objects: are they fine art or mass culture? Do they provoke discourse or provide documentation?; 2) to familiarize ourselves with key American photographers and subjects throughout history, and to place those figures within larger artistic and cultural movements; and 3) to further our critical reading, writing and speaking skills, specifically learning how to communicate about photography, and difficult or contentious issues and images.

ARH 390: Assignment in conjunction with ACS Grant

Race Story (15%): Following the example of Maurice Berger's *Race Stories* for the *Lens* blog of the *New York Times*, you will write an essay on race or ethnicity prompted by a photograph in the Centre archives. This assignment is part of a larger, collaborative project between Centre, Rollins College, Furman University, and Washington and Lee University. Through a grant from the Associated Colleges of the South, the four institutions are documenting their history of desegregation. Each of you will provide a narrative (visual analysis) for a photograph in our archives that will be published (eventually) on our joint website. Your narrative will be due at midterm, Tuesday, October 15.

1/ Describe the subject matter and formal qualities of the photograph.

Using appropriate medium-specific visual, descriptive, and technical language, describe what the image looks like. It is sometimes helpful to pretend that your audience has never seen the image that you have selected before; you must provide enough detail for your reader to "imagine" a version of the photograph using your description. Be sure that you describe what can be seen in the image (the subject matter) and how it has been composed. Tell (in some detail, not great detail) the formal and structural qualities of the image (such as the tonal, linear, and textural characteristics of the image). Try to be as accurate, evocative, and specific as possible.

2/ Analyze the context of the photograph.

Consider the significance of the subject matter that you described in step one in relation to the image's context and seemingly associated concepts. To help you develop a solid analysis, you will research any historical, political, cultural, social, economic, and artistic shifts that seem to have informed or been impacted by the image that you are discussing. You may wish to also consider the intentions of the maker of the image. However, keep in mind that this is something that you might only be able to approximate or guess and does not necessarily need to be included in an engaging exploration of a given image. If you are approaching your analysis from a specific theoretical framework – such as, a feminist, queer, postcolonial, or Marxist framework – you may need to ask yourself questions that are specific to the concerns of that particular approach to reading and understanding imagery. For example, if approaching from a feminist

position, you may ask yourself: how does this image subvert or solidify limiting gender expectations? Ensure that you clearly articulate which visual features of the work reveal the association, reference, conceptual link, or contextual information that you are discussing.

3/ Provide an interpretation of the photograph.

To complete your visual analysis, provide the reader with concluding comments that clearly articulate the overall impact – or, perhaps, ‘meaning’ – of your selected image. Sometimes you may arrive at multiple, even conflicting, interpretations of a work.

Reflection notes: 10/10 students in the course met all three of the above learning goals with this assignment. Their essays were approximately 2500-3000 words in length, and it remains a goal of mine to publish them on our joint website. Three of the essays were presented in spring 2020 as part of Centre College’s RICE symposium (celebration of undergraduate research).