

Public Interventions:
A Photographic Record of People of Color and Education

History 150 / American Ethnic Studies 150

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Explanation

Images, for most American college students, are so commonplace today (especially on their smart phones, laptops, and tablets) that they consider them fundamental to their understanding of society. But the use and curation of images in humanities teaching should be approached with caution.¹ Just like the understanding that all young people are “digital natives” is wrong, so is that they are adroit interpreters of visual primary sources.

This assignment seeks to utilize the interest younger students have of visual culture in order to expand their abilities to interpret the past. In this case, because they are interpreting images of public education, something with which most of them have had direct experience, their interaction with these primary sources will be relatively intimate. (Indeed, for many of us this would be the case: think about looking at a photo of your 6th grade class and teacher.) Thus, this assignment has two built-in advantages: the use of visuals and a “projected” nostalgia.

There is a challenge here, however; or as one of my students told me a couple of years ago, “you mean a haircut wasn’t just a haircut.” He was looking at a photo of a Navajo young man who was sent to an Indian boarding school, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (1880-1918). The school officials forced the boys to cut their relatively long hair in order to assimilate aesthetically into white notions of boyhood and manhood.² Put differently, students may not initially observe images within the historical context that produced the primary source. As Barbara Ormond and others recommend, we should guide our students through a detailed process that makes images, initially, less discernible, so that in the end students will become better interpreters of the past.

Introduction

The goal of this assignment is to make public what was “public”, and often unequal: education. The use of a blog for interpretation and critique allows you, the college student, to make a public and digital intervention in the histories of America by compiling and explaining the historical meanings of photographic images of students of color.

¹ Barbara Ormond, “Enabling Students to Read Historical Images: The Value of the Three-Level Guide for Historical Inquiry,” *The History Teacher* 44, no. 2 (2011): 179-90. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25799416>.

² See and/or listen to this story from Radiolab: <http://www.radiolab.org/story/photos-before-and-after-carlisle/>

Outcomes

After successfully completing the assignment, students will be able to:

- Compile a visual chronology of how a cultural group in America has been represented in the images of public education
- Evaluate how the established histories of peoples of color relate to archival images of US students of color in the years between 1860 and 2000
- Utilize a simple blogging platform

Instructions

1. Select one cultural group: Native Americans³, African Americans, Latino Americans, or Asian Americans
2. Find 6-12 images of public education (at any point between the 1860s to the 1990s) of the cultural group you're focusing on.
 - a. Use the websites that we've discussed in class (remember that these will help you start the process, but there are more on the Web
 - i. Native Americans: <http://ucsd.libguides.com/c.php?g=90745&p=983311>
 - ii. African Americans: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesonthepize/sources/>
 - iii. Latino Americans: <http://libguides.princeton.edu/c.php?g=84133&p=541897>
 - iv. Asian/Pacific Americans: <http://guides.library.ucla.edu/c.php?g=180439&p=1185603>
3. Answer this question, for each image, in 100-200 words: Does the image represent an aspect of the economic or cultural life of the group as discussed in the assigned readings? How?
 - a. Use proper spelling and grammar
 - b. Please cite your sources, both primary and secondary
4. Post the images and your answers before [due date here] on your blog.
 - a. Use Google's Blogger
 - b. Each image should be an independent post, and have your answer to the question and a comments section.
 - c. Make sure you have the comments section open, but the settings should be ones that allow YOU to control what comments the public sees
5. Share the URL of your blog on our Canvas site before [due date here].
6. View and read the blogs of other students.
7. Before [insert due date] choose three images on other students' blogs, and comment on each one in about 100 words by answering this question: what else should be added to the interpretation already offered by your classmate?
 - a. You are only allowed to choose one image from each blog
 - b. If the image has a comment, you may not add another. Choose another image.
 - c. Use proper spelling and grammar. Here are some guides:

³ Please remember this includes Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders.

- i. Mechanics: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/4/>
- ii. Grammar: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/5/>
- iii. Punctuation: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/6/>