

**National Endowment for the Humanities Landmark Seminar: The Most
Southern Place on Earth- June 2010
King Cotton and Early Media Images: Whose Story is Being Told?
by
Kathleen M. Meyer**

Objectives: This lesson will help students develop critical analysis tools when looking at photographic source material as well as familiarize students with the African-American agricultural experience in the Mississippi Delta region. Students will also look at the different way that white people and black people experienced it. This will further the overall objectives of the course: the truth of history is in the eye of the beholder.

Time: One class period (40-50 minutes).

Audience: Designed for seventh grade US history and up.

Rationale: Students are inundated with media images in the early 21st century. While we think this is a new trend, visual media is not new. In the mid-nineteenth century, photography was a novel and popular medium. Matthew Brady is perhaps the most famous early photographer, known for his careful documentation of the Civil War. The new art of photography grew and continued to be used both for documentation as well as entertainment. Once images began to be captured, they became susceptible to manipulation. Photographs were not always objective and were capable of aiding the story teller to tell whatever story he wished. With the ever increasing flow of media, our students *must* become skilled at evaluating what story is being told and who is doing the telling. The adage that seeing is believing becomes increasingly perilous as the ability to manipulate images only increases with time.

Background: The Delta region of Mississippi was settled starting around 1820. Rich alluvial soil in which to grow cotton was the attraction. The Delta was a large, thickly forested swamp-like area between the Mississippi and the Yazoo River. In order to clear the land, a potential landowner needed to bring a sizeable group of slaves. By 1850, slaves outnumbered whites in the Delta by 5 to 1. However, much of the Delta was cleared and settled after the Civil War; this did not eliminate the need for cheap labor to clear the land and pick the cotton. Eventually, the sharecropping system developed in the region. Sharecroppers' hours were long and the work was tedious and grueling. Sharecroppers and field hands worked from "can to can't", a phrase used to describe working from dawn to the setting of the sun. Often the system devolved into a form of debt peonage, whereby, at the end of the growing season sharecroppers owed the landlord most if not all of what they had produced. Wealthy white planters felt that extreme social control of the African-American culture was vital; the whites were outnumbered and they needed to keep their labor. For many decades The Delta had the highest number of lynchings in the South. It is no surprise that during the Civil Rights era, the Delta was one of the most hostile regions to the Civil Rights movement. White planters were often paternal in their attitudes towards their

sharecroppers. They convinced themselves that the African-American population was simple, child-like creatures that they benevolently looked after. This attitude was propagated in the larger, white American culture through picture postcards of the South sent back to the North depicting the sharecroppers as simpletons and as people who were enjoying their lot in life. Images are powerful. White people seemed happy to go along with the image of the watermelon eating, smiling field worker because it allowed a very profitable system to continue and assuaged guilt. Racism in the northern and southern US was an established fact of life. It was not until the very powerful image of a badly beaten and mutilated fourteen year old, Emmet Till, was published in a national magazine that white people were shocked out of their bucolic, pastoral fantasy in the 1950's. Shortly thereafter, the Civil Rights movement began.

The Mississippi Delta and southern African-American life has been visually well documented in a variety of ways. During the Great Depression the Farm Security Administration sent photographers down to document life in the Delta. Dorothea Lange was the most famous of these photographers. A group of postcards regarding African-Americans in the South has also survived and is found in the Schomburg collection of the New York Public Library. These two sources provide the material for this one day exercise.

Materials Needed:

- (1) Two analysis sheets for each child. (Scroll farther down for analysis sheet.)
- (2) Copies of FSA photos and postcards. In order to retrieve images go to these sites. You can print hard copies or present them in the power point attachment provided.

In order to retrieve images from the websites copy and click the following links:

<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/dgkeysearchresult.cfm?num=40&r=02fAfrican%2520Americans&word=&rOper=2&stype=Rel&rSource=&rDiv=Photographs%20and%20Prints%20Division&rCol=&s=3¬word=&d=&c=&f=&k=0&imgs=20&pNum=>

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/search?q=Mississippi&c=100&st=grid&co=fsa>

Procedure:

- (1) Introduce the lesson to students by writing these two quotes on the board.
 - "Seeing is believing."
 - "A picture is worth a thousand words."

Discuss the quotes. Possible discussion questions might be:

- Is it possible to not believe what you see? How?

- Can images deceive you? How?
- How can images be manipulated?
- Why are images so powerful?

(2) Hand out analysis sheets. Two per student.

(3) Provide images. This can be done on a screen whereby the entire class works with the same pictures (use attached PowerPoint) or students can be given a picture from each collection to evaluate themselves. Students could also work in groups.

(4) Have students evaluate the pictures using the analysis sheets.

(5) Wrap up discussion. Share analysis sheets.

Assessment:

Students could evaluate the project in a variety of ways:

(1) Write a diary entry from the viewpoint of an African-American looking at one of the postcards.

(2) Draw a Venn diagram showing the differences and the similarities of the photographs from the FSA and the Schomburg collection.

(3) Grade analysis sheets.

NAME: _____



Photographic Analysis Sheet

1. What is the title of the photograph? _____
2. How many people are in the photograph? _____
3. What is the dominant emotion expressed by the people in the picture? (if you can tell) _____

4. What is the setting of the picture? Date? _____

5. What do you think the purpose of the picture is? (entertainment, document, propaganda, etc.) _____
6. What is the main emotion you feel when you look at the picture?

7. Given what you know about history, do you think that the main emotion that the people in the photograph are expressing is accurate? _____
8. Why or why not?

9. If no emotion or feeling is present, why do you think that might be? _____
10. Who do you think paid the photographer?
