Worth a Thousand Words: American Visual History and Methods
Instructor: Elizabeth Wolfson
AMCS Fall 2019

Course description:
“A picture is worth a thousand words.” “The camera never lies.” These idioms capture our collective understanding of photography as a form of visual evidence, demonstrating our faith in a photograph’s operation as “proof.” Yet at the same time, American history is full of examples of photographic practices that manipulated or otherwise challenged this assumption. This seeming contradiction invites us to think critically about photographs’ function as historical documents and how we use them to write history. Students in this course will study historical examples of Americans’ use of photography to challenge negative stereotypes, pursue economic opportunity, and claim civil rights. We will also examine different ways scholars use photographic images and archives to study American culture and history. Through class visits to archives on and near campus, students will become acquainted with the visual resources available to them and the procedures for conducting research in those archives. Students will increase their visual competencies by working closely with images sourced from these archives as well as their own family and personal photography collections. Reading and writing assignments will introduce students to key theories of visual history and archives, examine case studies in American visual history, and build towards a final research project, designed in collaboration with the instructor, related to the student’s broader research interests.

Required texts:
Students are required to either purchase or obtain the following books from the University library. New or used copies of books may be purchased from the university bookstore or online through Amazon or AbeBooks; however, please be sure double check that you purchase the edition listed below, as failure to do so may result in confusion or missed material. All other readings will be available through Canvas.


Course requirements:
Reading responses: 15% -- Over the course of the semester students should submit ten written reflections on the assigned reading for the week. Students may skip any two weeks of reading out of the semester without penalty; any further missed responses will result in an automatic 5 point deduction to this portion of their overall grade.

While some summarization of the reading is expected, for the most part these reflections should function as a space to gather your thoughts/reactions to the readings as they will serve as a point of departure for class discussion. Analysis should focus on the author’s main arguments and their particular approach to visual archives. What questions do you have following the reading? How do different authors address similar themes or topics? What points did you find most interesting, and why?
Reading responses should be submitted **by 10:00pm the night before class**, and students should bring either a printed or digital version of their response with them to class (in addition to the readings for the week).

**Class discussion leadership: 15%** -- Each student will be tasked with working with the instructor in leading discussion for one week out of the semester. Students should send me a list of 6-8 discussion questions **before 10:00pm the night before class**. Questions should investigate the primary themes and arguments of each reading and lead students in examining how the particular reading models a specific approach to visual history and/or writing history with images. Questions should also draw connections between various readings, either for that week or different weeks, to one another.

**Mid-term paper: 25%** -- 8-10 pages double-spaced, due Week 7.
Using the frameworks for working with image archives and historical images examined in Part I of the course, students should analyze a visual collection held in WUSTL Special Collections. The collection might only include images, or it might be part of a larger collection. Your paper should make an argument regarding the particularities of the historical perspective provided by a focus on visual objects. Analysis should employ both primary and secondary historical sources as well as close readings or individual or small sets of images.

**Final project prospectus: 10%** -- 1-2 pages double-spaced, due Week 10.
A brief description of your final project. Should include: information about the collection(s) you plan to work with, the historical questions you intend to ask about the collection(s), the method(s) or frameworks you intend to apply to the collection, and a short bibliography of primary and secondary sources you intend to employ in your analysis. Also, if you select Option #1 for your final paper (see below), you should address your plans for revising/expanding your midterm paper.

**Final Project: 35%** -- 15-20 pages double-spaced, due the final day of class.
Students have two options for the final project:
- **Option #1:** Revise and expand your midterm paper into a larger research project. If you choose this option, I expect that your final paper will reflect a substantial amount of additional research and reading to that conducted for the midterm paper, demonstrate deepened thinking on your topic and objects, and incorporate my feedback on the midterm. (If any of my comments are unclear or you have any questions about how to do this, ask!) You should also expand your image base from the midterm, either by incorporating additional images from your collection and/or by including images from other collections either at WUSTL or in other local or national (i.e. Library of Congress) digital archives.
- **Option #2:** Develop a new research project drawing on other university, local and/or national archival collections.

General Course Policies:
INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT STATEMENT: The best learning environment—whether in the classroom, studio, laboratory, or fieldwork site—is one in which all members feel respected while being productively challenged. At Washington University in St. Louis, we are dedicated to fostering an inclusive atmosphere, in which all participants can contribute, explore, and challenge their own ideas as well as those of others. Every participant has an active responsibility to foster a climate of intellectual stimulation, openness, and respect for diverse perspectives, questions, personal backgrounds, abilities, and experiences, although instructors bear primary responsibility for its maintenance.

A range of resources is available to those who perceive a learning environment as lacking inclusivity, as defined in the preceding paragraph. If possible, we encourage students to speak directly with their instructor about any suggestions or concerns they have regarding a particular instructional space or situation. Alternatively, students may bring concerns to another trusted advisor or administrator (such as an academic advisor, mentor, department chair, or dean). All classroom participants—including faculty, staff, and students—who observe a bias incident affecting a student may also file a report (whether personally or anonymously) utilizing the online Bias Report and Support System.

ABSENCES, LATENESS AND LATE WORK: Class attendance is for your success in the course. Excessive lateness or absences will negatively affect your final grade in the class.

DISABILITY RESOURCES: If you have a disability that requires an accommodation, please speak with me and consult the Disability Resource Center at Cornerstone (cornerstone.wustl.edu/). Cornerstone staff will determine appropriate accommodations and will work with me to make sure these are available to you.

WRITING ASSISTANCE: For additional help on your writing, consult the expert staff of The Writing Center (writingcenter.wustl.edu) in Olin Library (first floor). It can be enormously helpful to ask someone outside a course to read your essays and to provide feedback on strength of argument, clarity, organization, etc.

THE UNIVERSITY’S PREFERRED NAME POLICY FOR STUDENTS, with additional resources and information, may be found here: registrar.wustl.edu/student-records/ssn-name-changes/preferred-name-policy/preferred-name-policy-student/.

ACCOMMODATIONS BASED UPON SEXUAL ASSAULT: The University is committed to offering reasonable academic accommodations to students who are victims of sexual assault. Students are eligible for accommodation regardless of whether they seek criminal or disciplinary action. Depending on the specific nature of the allegation, such measures may include but are not limited to: implementation of a no-contact order, course/classroom assignment changes, and other academic support services and accommodations. If you need to request such accommodations, please direct your request to Kim Webb (kim_webb@wustl.edu), Director of the Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Center. Ms. Webb is a confidential resource; however, requests for
accommodations will be shared with the appropriate University administration and faculty. The University will maintain as confidential any accommodations or protective measures provided to an individual student so long as it does not impair the ability to provide such measures.

You can also speak confidentially and learn more about available resources at the Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Center by calling (314) 935-8761 or visiting the 4th floor of Seigle Hall.

BIAS REPORTING: The University has a process through which students, faculty, staff and community members who have experienced or witnessed incidents of bias, prejudice or discrimination against a student can report their experiences to the University’s Bias Report and Support System (BRSS) team. See: brss.wustl.edu

MENTAL HEALTH: Mental Health Services’ professional staff members work with students to resolve personal and interpersonal difficulties, many of which can affect the academic experience. These include conflicts with or worry about friends or family, concerns about eating or drinking patterns, and feelings of anxiety and depression. See: shs.wustl.edu/MentalHealth

Disclaimer
The instructor reserves the right to make modifications to this information throughout the semester.

Course Schedule:

Week 1 – Welcome to class; introductions

Part I: Understanding visual history

Week 2 – What is visual history?
Reading:

Week 3 – What is an archive?
Reading:

Week 4 – Archives, objects, narratives

**Week 5 – Archival images + counter-historical narratives**
Reading:

**Week 6 – Personal photos + visual history**
Visit: WUSTL Special Collections, Olin Library
Reading:

**Part II: Case studies in American visual history**

**In-class workshop of mid-term paper images**

**Mid-term paper due via email before the start of class**

**Week 9 –** Visit: Missouri Historical Society Library & Research Center
**Meet at MHS**

**Week 10 –** Visit: The State Historical Society of Missouri, Research Center-St. Louis, UMSL
**Meet at UMSL**

**Final project prospectus due via email before the start of class**


**Week 14** – In-class final paper workshop

**Week 15** – Project presentations

**Final papers due via email before the start of class**
