

INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCES

EXPLORING RACISM THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

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Recommended for Grades 9-12

This Instructional Resource presents a selection of photographs from the collection of the Center for Creative Photography (CCP) at the University of Arizona. The photographs of Marion Palfi, Ansel Adams, and David Levinthal are included as examples of documentary, found, and staged imagery that reflect historical and social practices of individual, societal, and institutional racism in the United States. These photographs were originally presented as educational programming at CCP, where they were discussed with classes studying racism, writing, and art and visual culture education. Areas of study across the curriculum, including art, photography, language arts, history, sociology and literature can be enhanced as students examine these images for insights into racism, social justice, documentation, and creative expression.

Race, Representation, Social Justice, and the Classroom

According to Apple (1993) race is not a stable category. It intersects with culture, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality and is enacted in society in different ways. **Representations such as photographs shape how we view people and the world and can also be used to enable students to think about race and race relations.** Since the political struggles of the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and the gay and lesbian rights movement, many educators have changed their notions about curriculum to include discussion of representations and their ability to shape understandings. **They feel that education can be used to remake society and challenge power structures to foster social and political equity.** This Instructional Resource for high school teachers was forged as part of this larger discussion through a collaboration with a museum educator, a university professor, and graduate students.

Objectives

Students who are involved in these instructional activities will be able to:

- Understand that photography is a medium through which to expose and encourage discussion about racism, social justice, and inequality.
- Discuss and investigate societal and institutional racism in the US through photographs by Marion Palfi, Ansel Adams, and David Levinthal.
- Develop an awareness of social justice by discussing issues seen within the photographs such as discrimination, stereotyping, disrespect, and oppression of racial and ethnic minority groups.
- Create expressive artworks concerning diversity and social justice in historical and contemporary contexts.



figure 1
*At Madena, California, the Bureau of Indian Affairs Has
 a School. "To Change the Indian Is Our Job!" New Arrivals,
 1967-69. Photograph by Marion Palfi. Collection Center
 for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. © 1998,
 Arizona Board of Regents.*

Marion Palfi

Born in Germany to a Jewish family, photographer Marion Palfi (1907-1978) fled Hitler's army in Europe and settled in New York City just prior to the outbreak of World War II. As she traveled through many parts of the United States, she was troubled by situations she encountered such as racial intolerance and poverty in urban centers. She also was disturbed by the unwillingness or inability of Americans to recognize and address these problems. Using her camera as a tool to record and address her concerns, she brought a fresh perspective to the topic of racism and injustice in America. **Palfi described herself as a "social research photographer" and believed that art could and should effect social change.** However, she had difficulty getting her work exhibited and published, largely because many Americans were not interested in seeing and hearing about their country's social inequities. Palfi produced several large documentary studies that included subjects such as discrimination

against African Americans, poverty in urban areas, and racist treatment of Native Americans.

Palfi's photographs document aspects of U.S. government-sanctioned practices that organized, invited, and sometimes forced the relocation of Native American children from reservations to boarding schools sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs or to Anglo schools and homes. This treatment was spearheaded by a movement at the end of the 19th century to assimilate Native Americans to Anglo-Caucasian culture in the name of Americanization, which ultimately led to the loss of Native language, identity, rituals, and traditional values (Moore, 2005). Boarding schools funded by the federal government and Christian missionary involvement grew in number and by the 1970s reached an enrollment of approximately 60,000 Native American children (Colmant, 2000). This practice continued until the 1980s.



figure 2
New Arrivals. He is Hoquiam, She is a Clallam, "Relocation School," ca. 1967.
 Photograph by Marion Palfi. Collection Center for Creative Photography,
 University of Arizona. © 1998, Arizona Board of Regents.

Native children in boarding schools were required to speak and use only English. They were prohibited from using their native languages even amongst themselves, or face strict disciplinary measures. They were also required to wear non-native clothing and to cut their hair, which according to native beliefs is only done when mourning. Testimonials of many Native Americans who survived these schools affirm harsh conditions and culturally hostile environments intended to strip them of their identities (Adams, 1997).

Palfi's photograph of a Native American girl as a "new arrival" at a Bureau of Indian Affairs school (Figure 1) is photographed alone in front of a bank of impersonal school lockers. This approach focuses our attention on her disheartened and fearful expression, and body language. The group of young Native American children addressed as new arrivals (Figure 2) have been brought to a "relocation school" by train. The photograph's title also tells us that the young Native American girl and boy in the center foreground are from different nations.

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think that the artist chose to photograph this subject?
- What do the photographs' titles tell us about Palfi's subjects and about what is happening in these scenes?
- How would you feel if you were in this situation?
- What are the "new arrivals" wearing? Why?
- Even though the U.S. Constitution declares that no person can be discriminated against because of his or her race, why were Native American children forced to attend Anglo boarding schools until the 1980s?
- What other ways have Native American people been disrespected and oppressed throughout U. S. history and popular culture?



figure 3
Top of Radio in Yonemitsu Residence. Soldier Pictured Is Robert Yonemitsu, 1943.
 Photograph by Ansel Adams. Collection Center for Creative Photography,
 The University of Arizona. © 2010, The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust.

Ansel Adams

Ansel Adams (1902-1984) is one of the most renowned American photographers and respected environmentalists of the 20th century. Adams devoted himself to the interpretation, preservation, and conservation of nature through his remarkable and breathtaking landscape images of the American West. Adams had a strong sense of social responsibility and an innate desire to allow people to experience the landscape he cherished through his photographs.

Departing from his well-known landscape genre, the photographs presented here represent Adams' work as a social documentarian, photographing life at the Manzanar War Internment/Relocation Camp. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor during World War II, the U.S. government, motivated by fear of treason and the potential for acts of espionage, forced more than 110,000 Japanese Americans and Japanese immigrants living in the western United States into internment camps. The official mandate entitled Executive Order 9066 was issued by President Franklin Roosevelt on February 19, 1942 (Conrat, M. & Conrat, R., 1992). Many had to sell their property at enormous financial loss, taking whatever they could carry while being

treated as the enemy. Critics of these Japanese American internment camps, then and now, believe that Executive Order 9066 violated the Fifth Amendment, which states that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law (Hatamiya, 1994). **A government policy or mandate, such as Executive Order 9066, which discriminates against a particular race is a form of institutional racism.** This practice has been defined as "policies of the dominant race/ethnic/gender institutions and the behavior of individuals who control these institutions and implement policies that are intended to have a differential and/or harmful effect on minority race/ethnic/gender/ groups" (Pincus, 2000, p. 31).

In October of 1943 and throughout 1944, Adams traveled to Manzanar, located at the bottom of the Sierra Nevada in Owens Valley, California. It was the first and most widely known internment camp to be organized, holding a peak population of 10,046 people of Japanese descent, two thirds of whom were U.S. citizens by birth. Manzanar was functional from April of 1942 until November of 1945. The housing within the camp was one square mile and surrounded by barbed wire and guard towers with armed military police.

figure 4
Group Walking from School, ca. 1943. Photograph by Ansel Adams. Collection Center for Creative Photography,
The University of Arizona. © 2010, The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust.



Through these photographs, Adams wanted to show the innate “Americanness” of the internees. Unlike traditional social documentary photographs, Adams’ images did not portray his subjects in distress. His approach was subtler. He wanted to show that the internees were just like normal American citizens. He focused his image making on school, sports, and Christianity, to communicate the idea that Manzanar was a fully functioning American community holding “loyal” American citizens. He was not attached to any kind of governmental agency that could determine his images or point of view. He avoided this kind of sponsorship specifically because he wanted the freedom to work with personal concepts and expressions.

In the still-life photograph (Figure 3), there are various elements that are meant to make the viewer feel like this family is truly American. The lily plant, which was historically used within Christian religious art, situated next to the picture of Jesus Christ, represents that this family is embracing Christianity and that faith is an important part of their lives. The portrait taken of one of the family members fighting in the U.S. army and the pile of letters he has written to his younger sister represent a loyalty to America as well as a strong sense of family values.

While Adams was most interested in documenting the people of Manzanar and their everyday activities, he also attempted to incorporate the land as much as possible within his photographs. He believed that the environment played a role in how the internees adapted to their surroundings. Through the image of young girls walking to school (Figure 4), Adams was attempting to give the viewer a sense of what it was like to be at Manzanar, as well as depict a scene to which all Americans could relate.

Discussion Questions:

- Why do you think Ansel Adams chose to photograph this subject?
- What are the symbolic and connotative meanings of objects shown in the image, *Top of Radio in Yonemitsu Residence*? What do the objects tell us about the Yonemitsu family?
- Adams chose to exclude the harsh realities of Manzanar. Does his presentation of the subject influence your ideas about Manzanar?
- Do these images help us understand what the people interned at Manzanar actually experienced?
- Why did Adams photograph and focus on commonalities between the interned Japanese-Americans and Americans outside the camps, rather than their differences? Do physical characteristics or ethnicity define or disqualify someone as being American? How about religious or social affiliations?
- The U.S. was also at war with Germany and with Italy. Why do you think that German Americans and Italian Americans were not interned in this country?

David Levinthal

Contemporary artist David Levinthal (American, 1949-) stages scenes on tabletops with toys and manufactured objects, and photographs them to create bodies of work about diverse subjects such as space, the American West, war, and racism.

Particularly provoking is Levinthal’s Blackface series that repurposes African American memorabilia, drawing attention to racist attitudes and beliefs. These mass-produced objects that included toys, cookie jars, and lawn jockeys were particularly popular in the American south where much of the White population supported slavery and felt anger at being forced to accept freedom for African Americans. The figurines represented resentment toward the abolition of slavery and a nostalgic longing for previous times. Grotesque and silly facial features including smiling or gaping mouths and wild eyes were often incorporated into the figures’ designs resulting in buffoonish or frightening characterizations. Blackface toys and figurines are now collectors’ items and serve as reminders of a time in American history when African Americans were routinely owned, ridiculed, beaten, and killed because of the color of their skin (Rufali, 2008).

Levinthal chose a Blackface figurine with a large head (Figure 5) and photographed this object using a large camera that greatly magnified the original object and distorted it through selective focus. Levinthal photographed from above and positioned the head closest to the camera so that it would appear in sharp focus compared to the lower part of its body, which is blurred. This conscious staging along with the figure’s startling red lips, which were also part of the minstrel Blackface aesthetic, further exaggerated the shape of the figure and its distorted expression.

Levinthal began collecting and photographing racist African American memorabilia in 1995 and has included over 100 photographs in his Blackface series. He is aware that there is a thriving market for these figurines and has stated that he can think of “no other group of people that have been so negatively caricatured for such a long period of time” (Brockington, 1997). Levinthal also understands that this work is challenging and that the subject may make some viewers uncomfortable, but he feels it is important to bring attention to these objects as a means of creating a dialogue about racism (personal communication, November and December, 2009).

Discussion Questions:

- Why do you think the artist chose to photograph this subject?
- How is the subject represented in this photograph? Does it represent a stereotype?
- What do you think the work is about?
- Why is this object important to discuss?
- Levinthal is a white artist addressing anti-African American sentiment. What is your opinion about this?

figure 5
Untitled, 1997. Photograph by David Levinthal. © Collection Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona.



Social Justice Activities

Activity One: Visual Representation | Have your students view the photographs in preparation for a class discussion. Introduce the idea that everyone at some point has felt like a victim of discrimination, stereotyping, and prejudice. Have students discuss their own personal experiences where they have felt victimized due to these social injustice practices. Have them explain the situation and discuss how it made them feel. Ask students how they could express the situation or their feelings visually and have them create artwork using any media such as photography, painting, sculpture, or collage.

Activity Two: Photography as Social Justice | Levinthal staged a scene using a once popular African American figurine to create his image. The use of found or bought objects in artwork is referred to as appropriation. Ask students to find an existing image or object that expresses or relates to prejudice, discrimination, or racism. Ask them to stage and photograph a scene using the object to repurpose its meaning. Have them use the following questions to write about their work: What object did you appropriate and why did you select it? How does the object relate to discrimination? How did you set up your scene to speak to the issue?

Activity Three: Visual Timeline to Address Racism | Both Palfi and Adams addressed topics that are not openly discussed or presented as part of America's history. Have students research invisible histories and discriminatory behavior against groups and create a visual timeline representing their research about it.

Assessment

Learning can be assessed and evaluated through student responses to the following questions:

- What people, objects, and/or events has the artist chosen and framed to explore racism?
- How does each image reflect aspects of racism?
- What does each photograph communicate such matters?
- What is the difference between individual and institutionalized racism?
- Which artists show an example of institutionalized racism?
- What do the images tell us about the culture in which these subjects were documented or created?
- Is the approach used by each photographer documentary, or staged? How does the approach used by the photographer contribute to the message of the work?
- Do you think that photographs can communicate ideas effectively? Do photographs have the power to engage and inform the people who look at them?

Conclusion

Photography is a powerful medium with which to explore social issues and concerns through the intersection of artistic form and concept. Through the discussions of images and suggested activities, students will understand various ways photographers have documented and addressed racism and discrimination. In addition, this resource will inspire them to create their own artwork in response to complex social issues and dialogues. We also expect that students develop abilities to carefully analyze and interpret photographs, develop and improve their powers of observation, increase vocabulary needed to respond, and sharpen their visual and critical thinking skills.

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