

Strategy: Analyze Visual and Oral Histories of Southerners

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Context:

I used these activities in an undergraduate American literature course, and I can also see them working in a variety of other disciplines and courses as well. Both activities were informal, small group exercises that could be developed into longer assignments. I used these assignments in conjunction with the reading of Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, though both could work as stand-alone activities as well.

Description:

This assignment is twofold and the activities can be used individually or together.

Part I: Analyzing Photographs from *You Have Seen Their Faces*

Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's collection, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), is a seminal work in its depiction of the southern working and poverty class.

- Copy photographs and short reading selections from the collection.
- In class, divide students into small groups. Give each group one photograph and the accompanying reading.
- Ask students to discuss in small groups how these images compare with their own mental images of Caldwell's characters in *Tobacco Road*.
- Discuss the groups' responses as a class.
- One could also have students consider how these historical images compare with more contemporary representations of the working class and poor.

Part II: Selections from the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) Oral Histories

The FWP oral histories sought to capture the voices of everyday Americans and represent, as accurately as possible, their lives. For purposes of this assignment, I focused on the narratives of southerners.

- Provide short reading selections from the FWP oral histories. Many of these have been collected into anthologies. For this assignment, I used readings from *First-Person America*, *These Are Our Lives*, and *Such as Us: Southern Voices of the Thirties*. I chose exclusively narratives from North Carolina.
- Divide the students into small groups and have them read through the selections.
- Ask students to compare the people in these narratives to the characters presented in *Tobacco Road*.
- Have students consider whether they agree with what many critics say about Caldwell: that, like some other writers of the time, he portrayed the Southern poor as "degenerate, stunted, and starving people" (Terrell and Hirsch xix).
- Discuss these issues as a large group once students have had an opportunity to work in small groups.

- These texts also provide good opportunities to discuss differences in genre as well as discussions about the complexities of collecting oral histories in ways that accurately represent those who have been interviewed.

How I use it:

As a follow-up activity to reading *Tobacco Road*, I present students with photographs and short reading selections from *You Have Seen Their Faces* and also readings from the FWP oral histories to offer both visual representations of the southern poor and, in the case of the FWP oral histories, narratives that present alternatives to Caldwell's novel. Using these visual and oral histories also provides students with an opportunity to work through their own assumptions/stereotypes about the southern working class and poor.

Resources

- Banks, Ann. "Federal Writers' Project." *American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940*. Library of Congress. 19 Oct. 1998. 27 July 2006 <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro.html>>.
- , ed. *First-Person America*. New York: Knopf, 1980.
- Bourke-White, Margaret, and Erskine Caldwell. *You Have Seen Their Faces*. 1937. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995.
- Caldwell, Erskine. *Tobacco Road*. 1932. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995.
- Carter, Robert, and Ann Banks. *Survey of Federal Writers Project Manuscript Holdings in State Depositories*. Washington: American Historical Association, 1985.
- Couch, W.T., ed. *These Are Our Lives*. 1939. New York: Norton, 1975.
- Mangione, Jerre. *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writer's Project, 1936-1943*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1983.
- Photographing the Representative American: You Have Seen Their Faces*. 27 July 2006 <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CLASS/am485_98/coe/Faces.html>.
- Terrill, Tom E., and Jerrold Hirsch. *Such As Us: Southern Voices of the Thirties*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1978.