

# **Grasping American Freedom**

## **Online Visual Essay/Final Assignment**

### **Overview**

Each of you will be responsible for researching and curating an online essay – using a range of visual, textual, and media primary sources – that addresses how freedom and its meanings relate to and help to explain a subject or case study in United States culture and history.

Bonus points will be given for the selection of subjects that reflect a creative approach to this assignment. For example, while you are not prevented from writing on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment and the political and philosophical contests over the right to bear arms, since we covered this in class a bit, and it is a prominent topic, you will not get as much credit for originality.

### **Content**

For this assignment, you are required to interpret sources for your topic that fall under three broadly defined categories:

(a) **Historical** - how have understandings of freedom in relationship to your subject or case study existed or functioned during different historical moments? How have these understandings changed over time, to what ends, and why?

(b) **Vernacular** - how have people addressed your topic through popular media, in folk expressions, in homemade art and videos, in everyday practice, etc.? What do these more “common” understandings tell us about freedom's vernacular or popular meaning?

(c) **Contemporary** - what are the present-day debates, news stories, pressing issues, policy concerns, etc., that continue to illuminate your subject? Why does your topic continue to matter in terms of how we understand and debate American freedom?

I am aware that these categories overlap, and do not exist exclusively of each other. That said, they are meant to help organize how you focus your research.

For the categories outlined above, I would like you to interpret a minimum of three primary sources per category.

For the purpose of this assignment, a “**primary source**” is defined here as a visual image (a political cartoon, bumper sticker, photograph, works of art such as paintings and sculpture), an original document (a letter, diary entry, newspaper editorial,

government record, map, oral histories), as well as cultural texts (such as music, videos, films, novels, dramatic plays, and poetry). Basically, any item that you are providing an original interpretation on represents a primary source for this assignment. You want to use a diverse range of primary sources. If all nine of the sources you interpret are photographs, for example, this will result in points deducted on your final grade, no matter how well you analyze them.

For this assignment, you are also required to integrate the arguments and interpretations that other authors have provided, in order to ensure that your own analysis is informed. These are your secondary sources. You are required to use a minimum of five.

This should go without saying, but... **DO NOT USE SECONDARY SOURCES THAT YOU RANDOMLY FIND ON THE INTERNET.** You need to use books and articles that are refereed and reviewed, represent in-depth research, and are trustworthy. In other words, the types of books and articles that your professors have you read in class.

I strongly encourage you to meet with me to brainstorm further about how you plan to conduct your research. At the risk of sounding vain, I have been doing this for a while now, and think that I have good insights into where you might look for primary sources, what secondary sources your own research should be in conversation with, etc.

### **Due Dates**

- **Outline/Draft - Due In-Class, Monday, November 12** - on Nov. 12, 14, and 19, you will also be work-shopping your projects in class, to your peers. While there are no hard and fast rules about how much you need to have done by November 12, you will be assessed on whether you have made enough progress at this date in order to receive the type of feedback and comments from me and your peers that will be helpful.
- **Final "Visual Essay" - Due by no later than 11:59PM on Wednesday, Dec. 18, with the link to your website sent to me via email** (in the syllabus is says via SAKAI, but this is an error).

### **Medium**

We will discuss this more, but it is up to you to choose the web platform that works best for you in presenting your final project. (I am open to bringing someone to class to conduct a workshop on the basics of blogging/digital humanities literacy, if people think this will be helpful).

Wordpress.com, Blogger.com, and Wix.com are all popular blogging sites that can be used by anyone, regardless of whether they have knowledge of coding. Omeka.net is an open-source website and software that museum professionals use to create digital exhibitions. It requires a bit more technical know-how, but arguably provides a better and more professional looking overall product.

## **Format**

The below elements are required. However, if you want to add to them, to fit your overall vision, go for it!

**Introductory essay** – This section will include your argument about how the concept of freedom is operating in relationship to your subject or case study, and should be informed by the secondary sources you are reading. The goal, as is the case with the response papers, is to synthesize existing knowledge on your topic, while providing your own original analysis and interpretations. The introductory essay should be 1200-1500 words in length, and should include footnotes, Chicago style.<sup>1</sup>

**Primary Sources (the objects or items of interpretation)** – For each of your primary sources being displayed, you will want to include an interpretive description of how it relates to your analysis and argument in the introductory essay. These should be brief and not overwhelm the reader with text– they should be no more than 150 words in length.

For primary sources that are textual, such as a novel, or a historical document, you will want to select a passage or key quote to visually display.

Sources should be credited using the following format:

“New Jersey Diner,” Image courtesy of Library of Congress, 1952.

[“Title of Image”], [Name of archive – if from a digital source, also provide a link to the website], [date of image].

**Additional Information Page** – the final thing you need to include is a page that contains your bibliography, links to other websites and online materials that relate to your subject, additional suggested readings, etc. Think of this section as being akin to the bottom of a Wikipedia page, which I am sure you are all familiar with.

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<sup>1</sup> Footnotes first came into common usage in the sixteenth century. Chuck Zerby, *The Devil's Details: A History of Footnote* (New York; Touchstone Press, 2003), 17-44.

For an excellent example of what a good online, visual essay can accomplish, please take a look at the following site: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/>

**AND, FINALLY...**

I realize that these are a lot of instructions to process, comprehend, and act upon. Invariably, I am sure I have omitted something or failed to explain a feature of this assignment fully.

To that end, begin working on this and thinking about it sooner than later. Set aside an hour or two a week, increasing this time devoted to the project as the semester progresses, so that you don't find yourself in a situation where you are trying to get everything done at the last second.

Last but not least, use me as a resource. I am here to help, bounce ideas off of, etc.