

“Isn’t That a Dude?”: Using Images to Teach Gender and Ethnic Diversity in the U.S. History Classroom—Pocahontas: A Case Study

Dominique Padurano
Horace Mann School

A FEW DAYS INTO THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR, my female students invariably beg, plead, and cajole me in the hopes of watching Disney’s *Pocahontas* in class. Toddlers when the film was released in 1995, doubtless they have seen it already dozens of times; more importantly, I cringe at the ethnic and gender stereotypes sometimes promoted by the animated “classics.”¹ This year, however, rather than summarily dismiss the girls’ request, I honored it—sort of. I used their admittedly flawed knowledge of Pocahontas as a springboard to dive more deeply into seventeenth-century politics and culture in England and the Chesapeake. By contrasting the images of the Powhatan princess that they had imbibed as children with those commissioned by Pocahontas herself, I was also able to inaugurate a year-long series of critical thinking exercises with images. In this essay, I will detail the sources and the questions that I used to develop the Pocahontas exercise, and suggest ways that teachers might develop similar exercises for their own classes. Moreover, I will provide a pedagogical rationale for incorporating various types of visual stimuli into an introductory survey of United States history at the secondary and post-secondary levels. Finally, I append an annotated bibliography of traditional and digital sources for teachers and students alike.

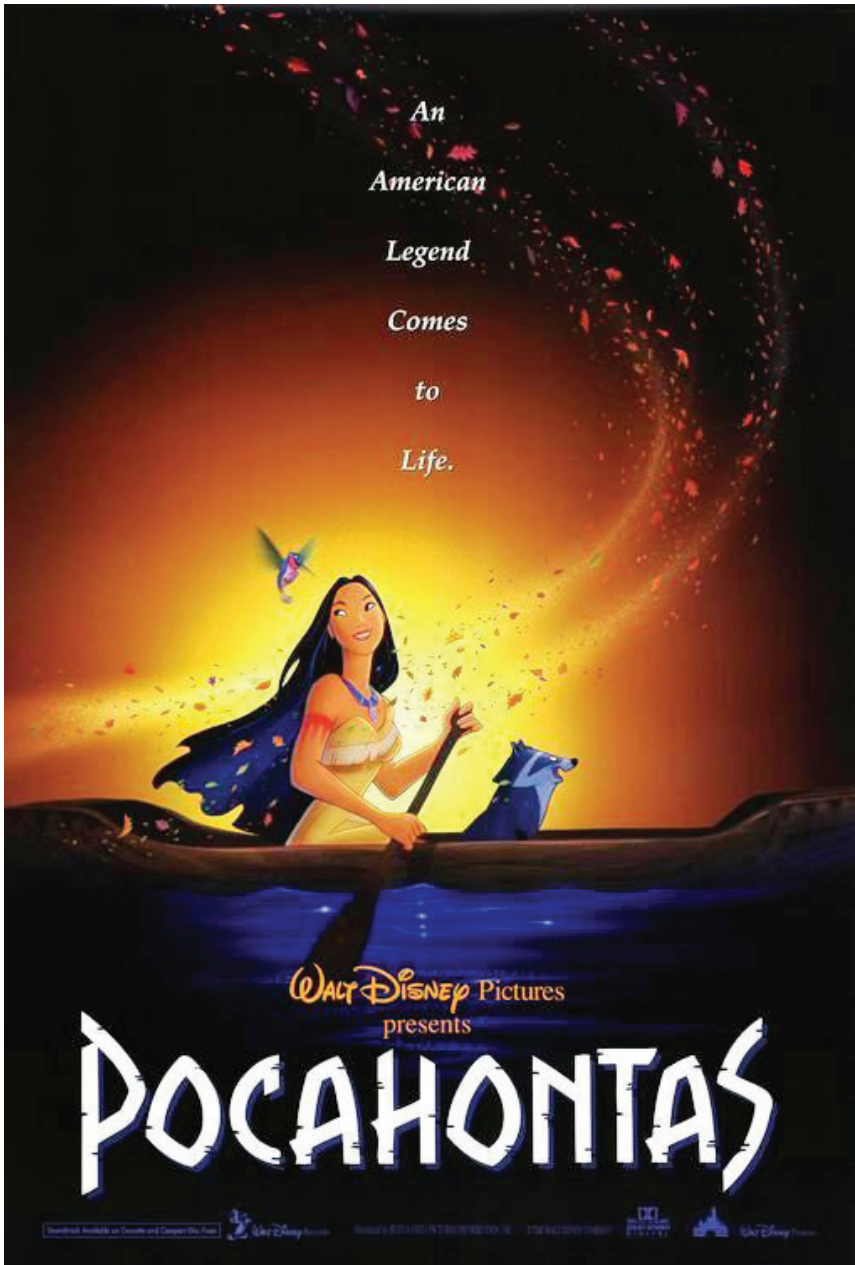


Figure 1: Pocahontas as depicted in the 1995 Walt Disney film, Pocahontas, <<http://disney.go.com/vault/archives/characters/pocahontas/pocahontas.html>>.

Rationale

Important pedagogical reasons for incorporating images into a survey of United States history abound. First, as Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner has taught us, many students learn best with the aid of visual stimuli.² Pictures may trigger a host of names, dates, facts, and concepts for the visual learner. Furthermore, significant historical events are often associated with an image; who can forget the horror-stricken look of the Kent State student crouching over the body of her slain classmate? Sometimes, images even have held the capacity to ignite historical movements. Nick Ut's 1972 photograph of 9-year old Kim Phuc, flesh seared by napalm, fleeing from her South Vietnamese village, lent a sense of moral urgency to the antiwar movement.³ Likewise, *Jet* magazine's publication of a photograph of Emmett Till's open casket catalyzed the grassroots mobilization of thousands of African Americans in the same year that Rosa Parks sparked the Montgomery bus boycott.⁴ Though students and adults alike may squirm at the violence depicted or implied in these three photographs, the images nevertheless remain as powerful today as they were last century. Discussing such pictures during lessons on the Civil Rights Movement or the Vietnam War may enable students to retain a visceral sense of the conflicts as well as to appreciate the role that individual people—even those their own age or younger than themselves—have played throughout our nation's history. Finally, in our increasingly visual culture, it is important that humanities educators equip students with the critical thinking skills necessary to interpret the variety of images that comprise contemporary life. Because so many of our conceptions about gender, ethnicity, and race stem from visual cues, lessons dedicated to imparting an appreciation of diversity are particularly well-suited to incorporating images.

Case Study: Pocahontas

Beginning the year with a series of visual analyses is also a fun, interesting way to engage students immediately in the life of the class. Since most surveys of U.S. history begin with Jamestown, the exercise contrasting two images of Pocahontas was a perfect point of departure. For future exercises, choosing two very different images of the same person, event, or landscape—such as I have done in the following lesson—is a particularly good method to teach students to consider bias, point of view, and the reliability of historical sources. First, I showed the version of Pocahontas from Disney's film cover (Figure 1).

I then asked students to describe Pocahontas. If students offered judgments like, "pretty," I asked them to provide specific details from the picture



Figure 2: Pocahontas as depicted in Simon Van de Passe's 1616 engraving, Matoaka als Rebecca Filia Potentiss: Princ: Powhatani Imp: Virginia, from Camilla Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 153.

upon which they based their characterization. When I guided the students through the process of essay-writing later that month, I had students recall the specificity of their descriptions in this exercise to solicit their careful use of textual and visual historical evidence.

If students are reticent to speak, teachers might consider formulating questions with the help of the bottom level of Bloom's taxonomy, and encourage more sophisticated analysis only after students have gained the confidence through successfully demonstrating their understanding of the basics.⁵ For instance, one might ask students "What is Pocahontas wearing?" before probing "What kind of person is Pocahontas?" Usually, asking progressively more complex questions is a good strategy for any lesson. However, when wrestling with a subject with which students already have a good deal of background [mis]information, sometimes teachers can challenge students' implicit assumptions by soliciting students' judgments first. Forcing students to articulate the reasons behind their immediate response to Pocahontas can illuminate the ways in which subtle gender and ethnic stereotypes are conveyed. Through guided questioning, students ascertain that the Disney animators depict Pocahontas as a gentle part of the natural world (surrounded by a raccoon, hummingbird, and water), beautiful (with long, flowing hair), and even sexual (her body shape is accentuated by tight-fitting, skimpy garments).

Next, I showed students an image of Pocahontas based on an engraving created by Simon Van de Passe in 1616 (Figure 2). The students' first reaction to the second image of Pocahontas was usually one of wonder: "Isn't that a dude?" After I reassured them that this was, in fact, a woman—indeed the same young woman that they had just characterized at exceedingly feminine—I prodded the students into detailing the visual characteristics that "masculinized" Pocahontas in this image. Students quickly identify the stiff hat (which also covers up the long locks from the previous image), the high collar, and the armor-like dress as the three most de-feminizing traits. Next, I help students decipher the Latin phrase running clockwise around the image—*Matoaka als Rebecca Filia Potentiss: Princ: Powhatan Imp: Virginia*. A caption of sorts, it identifies the sitter as "Matoaka" or "Rebecca"—the Christian moniker she took upon being baptized and marrying John Rolfe. (I inform students that "Pocahontas" was only a nickname meaning "mischievous one") Most importantly, the band of Latin text identifies the woman as the daughter ("filia") of the powerful prince of the Powhatan from the empire of Virginia. Commissioned by Pocahontas herself during her visit to England in 1616, the portrait was intended to convey the regal status of not just Pocahontas, but also of her father Powhatan, an intelligent ruler desperately hoping to retain his power



Figure 3: Alain Manesson Mallet's, P.les de Virginie, c. 1686.⁸

in the rapidly changing political climate of seventeenth-century Chesapeake. As a female emissary among mostly male power brokers, Pocahontas purposely chose these items of clothing for their masculine or asexual import. The hat, for instance, was one worn more often by men than women in seventeenth-century Britain, while the collar and the dress covered more skin than even most English dames of the day normally would. Perhaps aware of the contemporary stereotypes of women of other races as more innately sexual than white women (see below), Pocahontas used dress and attitude specifically to cast herself as the serious diplomat that she was.⁶

After students settled down and accepted the second image as Pocahontas, I encouraged them to ponder the extent to which both images were constructs of a historical imagination. Certainly, my initial goal in choosing the two distinct images was to create a state of “cognitive dissonance” in which the students had to grapple with their own background knowledge in order to “make room” for the new information that they had gathered from their analysis of the second image. Only by struggling to acknowledge that the second portrait of Pocahontas might be more “realistic” than the first can students begin to understand how the Pocahontas legend has been skewed both during her life and after her death. After making this breakthrough, students can then be pushed to explore the reasons *why* both images might have been so different. A sexualized image of Pocahontas (who was in fact a mere prepubescent when John Smith arrived in the Chesapeake) helped Disney make a profitable film, while a masculinized “Matoaka” promoted Pocahontas as the equal of her white, male counterparts in England. Finally, teachers may end the discussion by asking pupils to consider whether and to what extent we can accept these—or any—images as “truth.” Grappling with these questions while using artistic renderings facilitates similar discussions when analyzing photographs—so often presumed to present an unvarnished depiction of the world—later in the year.⁷

The Pocahontas lesson takes about forty-five minutes, depending on the level of student participation. Teachers at the university level could add a brief writing exercise at the conclusion of the image analysis discussion if their class periods are longer. If time permits, teachers of any level might also consider analyzing two or three of the images below in order to provide historical and iconographical context for the seventeenth-century portrait of Pocahontas, and such analysis could be conducted before or after the Pocahontas exercise.

Created during the late sixteenth and late seventeenth centuries, these prints offer divergent views of Native Americans and, in particular, of Indian women. Whether a noble savage conjuring up an abundant idyll (Figure 3), a warrior savage in which abundance (i.e., the hair and large



Figure 4: French engraving of Native American woman, 1579-1600.



Figure 5: French engraving of Native American woman, 1575.⁹

stature of “America”) has gone awry (Figure 4), or a seductive savage offering up her abundant landscape to the Christian master of “civilization” (Figure 5), manifold images of and messages about native women populated the imaginations of early European settlers in the Americas. Asking students to identify details and symbols within each image will nurture their visual acuity; guiding them through the meanings behind each detail and symbol will sharpen their critical thinking. Both tasks will enrich their understanding of the portraits of Pocahontas already discussed, and will lay useful groundwork for their analyses of other images throughout the course.

Guidelines for Educators

For educators who hope to begin incorporating images into their survey courses of American history, I can share a few guidelines that I have developed during the past decade of working with visuals in the classroom.

1. First, do not assume that students know how to interpret images; we often need to guide them through the analysis, especially the first few times. Though the maxim “a picture is worth a



Figure 6: The lynching of Lige Daniels, August 3, 1920, Center, Texas. Gelatin silver print. Real photo postcard (front). 3 1/2" x 5 1/2". From Without Sanctuary, <<http://www.withoutsanctuary.org>>.

- thousand words” might be true, without the right words to elicit questions and thoughts about the picture, the image will remain a solitary experience, perhaps devoid of historical context. Provide scaffolding questions early in the year, working from the bottom to the top of Bloom’s taxonomy. Once students become comfortable with analyzing images, you can ask them to do so on their own.
2. Next, do not overwhelm students with too many images to decipher at first. Comparing and contrasting two images in the beginning of the year will slowly habituate students to analyzing and incorporating images into essays as they would any other primary source.
 3. Do use your own interests as a guide. Just as you do not want to overwhelm students, do not overwhelm yourself. Do not feel compelled to use images in every unit, but instead slowly incorporate them into your curriculum.
 4. Caption images whenever possible. Provide students with information about the creator of the image (i.e., artist, photographer, or even corporation name), the title of work, and its date. Treat an image as you would any other historical source.
 5. Toward that end, make students question the reliability of the images. Do not assume that even a photograph “tells the truth.” Like writers, photographers have bias and can stage, crop, and otherwise manipulate photographs in order to serve their own ends.¹⁰
 6. Finally, when showing images in PowerPoint format, avoid using text as much as possible. Text may detract from the impact of the image (of course, sometimes sparing use of words can enhance the meaning of a picture [see, for example, Figures 6 and 7 below]), and so should be used carefully to obtain maximum effect from both. In the examples below, I show students the text first; many students are shocked to learn about the commodification of lynching).

Conclusion

While incorporating images into a United States history survey course may take some time at first, in the long run, the investment pays off for both teacher and students. Teachers may experience a second honeymoon with the subject when it is told through a new medium, and students—many of whom deal with images more comfortably than they do with text—may

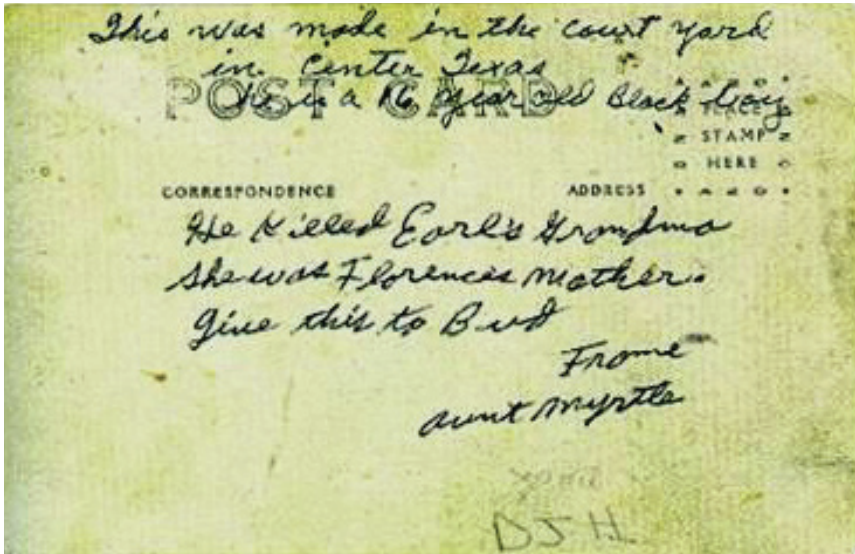


Figure 7: *The lynching of Lige Daniels, August 3, 1920, Center, Texas. Gelatin silver print. Real photo postcard (back). 3 ½" x 5 ½". From Without Sanctuary, <<http://www.withoutsanctuary.org>>. Text reads: "This was made in the court yard in Center, Texas. [H]e is a 16 year old [b]lack boy. He killed Earl's [g]randma[.] She was Florence's mother. Give this to Bud. From Aunt Myrtle".*

encounter a newfound love for history when it is conveyed in a manner accessible to them. Moreover, by using students' familiarity with the visual, educators may discover a powerful new tool that can help them teach the many facts, complex concepts, and important skills of analysis and synthesis that form the core of any United States history survey class.

Notes

I would like to thank Chris Averill, Jim Giardina, John Glen, Raymond "Skip" Hyser, Vibert White, and the Advanced Placement United States History readers who attended the presentation upon which this paper is based in Louisville, Kentucky on June 8, 2009. Their encouragement to present the talk and to transform it into a paper and their comments and questions on the talk itself have been invaluable. All errors and omissions are, of course, my own.

1. "Pocahontas," Internet Movie Database, <<http://www.imdb.com/find?s=all&q=Pocahontas&x=0&y=0>>.
2. Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
3. "Picture Power: Vietnam Napalm Attack," BBC News, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4517597.stm>>.
4. Noah Adams, "Emmett Till and the Impact of Images: Photos of Murdered Youth Spurred Civil Rights Activism," National Public Radio, 23 June 2004 <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyID=1969702>>.
5. Educators unfamiliar with Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy or its recent reformulation may wish to consult Richard C. Overbaugh and Lynn Schultz, "Bloom's Taxonomy," <http://www.odu.edu/educ/roverbau/Bloom/blooms_taxonomy.htm>.
6. For my analysis of the Van de Passe portrait of Pocahontas, I am indebted to Camilla Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), especially pp. 151-154. Townsend also notes that the ostrich feather fan held by Pocahontas was a symbol of regal status, and the subject's direct stare at the viewer was more often adopted by men (while "women more often tilted their heads down or to the side, subserviently, flirtatiously").
7. For an excellent discussion of the constructed nature of even "documentary" photographs, see Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1989). For a similar discussion appropriate for high school-aged students, see Robert Westbrook, "Lewis Hine and the Two Faces of Progressive Photography," in *Major Problems in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era*, ed. Leon Fink (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1993).
8. Alain Manesson Mallet, *Ples de Virginie*, Frankfurt, c. 1686; located at Lee Jackson Maps, "Antique Maps of America," <<http://www.leejacksonmaps.com/america.htm>>.
9. Figures 4 and 5 were scanned from *Discovering the American Past: A Look at the Evidence*, ed. William Bruce Wheeler and Susan D. Becker, fifth edition, vol. 1 (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 15-16.
10. See Stange.

Appendix: Bibliography

Articles and Books

I found the articles listed below on the Education Research Information Center (ERIC) database, using the SmartText option to search the phrase "teaching history through images" and limiting the search to "United States History," "Primary Sources," and "Secondary Education," which narrowed the results to a manageable number (120). Below are *only* the sources from that search that pertain to race or gender. There were many others that I did not include here that contained other types of visual images and/or lesson plans for using images in the U.S. history classroom. N.B.: While numerous, the National Archives

and Records Administration (NARA) lesson plans' images accessed through ERIC itself are often of low quality. The website for all of the NARA lesson plans, subtitled "The Constitution Community," is <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/>>; the images there are of much higher quality. Document analysis worksheets for cartoons, maps, photographs, posters, and other visual materials can be downloaded as PDFs at this site as well.

General/Pedagogy

Coohill, Joseph. "Images and the History Lecture: Teaching the History Channel Generation." *The History Teacher* 39 (August 2006): 455-465. *Especially applicable for college instructors.*

Stange, Maren. *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1989. *Though the prose is a bit dense, this work encourages students to consider the constructed nature of even "documentary" photographs, such as those by Jacob Riis and Dorothea Lange.*

Trachtenberg, Alan. *Reading American Photographs: Images as History: Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1989. *My AP students rated the chapter on Civil War photography, "Albums of War," as one of their favorites in 2010.*

Van Hover, Stephanie, Kathy Swan, and Michael Berson. "Digital Images in the History Classroom." *Learning & Leading with Technology* 31 (May 2004): 22-25. *See also International Society for Technology in Education, <<http://www.iste.org>>.*

Colonial Era

Townsend, Camilla. *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2004. *See pages 151-154 for discussion of the Pocahontas portrait.*

Revolution

Trail, David. "Images of the American Revolution. The Constitution Community: Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s)." U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/revolution-images/>>. *The fact that all of the images in this lesson plan are of men might raise interesting discussion of the gendered nature of republicanism. Toward that end, teachers might consider using in conjunction with:*

Kerber, Linda. "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment: An American Perspective." *American Quarterly* 28 (Summer 1976): 187-205.

Lewis, Jan L. "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 44 (October 1987): 689-721.

Wood, Gordon S. *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different*. New York: Penguin, 2006.

Antebellum South

Hughes, Richard L. "Minstrel Music: The Sounds and Images of Race in Antebellum America." *The History Teacher* 40 (November 2006): 27-43. *Decent, but not great, image quality.*

The West/Native Americans

"Campfire Stories with George Catlin: An Encounter of Two Cultures." <<http://www.catlinclassroom.si.edu>>.

A range of interdisciplinary lesson plans with links to other websites.

Clark, Linda Darus. "The Sioux Treaty of 1868. The Constitution Community: Expansion and Reform (1801-1861)." U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/sioux-treaty/>>.

Webb, Katherine. "Powhatan, Pocahontas, Perspective, and the Purpose of History." National Institute of American History and Democracy, <<http://niahd.wm.edu/index.php?browse=entry&id=6234>>.

Gilded Age and Progressive Era

"Photographs of Lewis Hine: Documentation of Child Labor." U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/hine-photos/>>.

This lesson plan does not have to do a great deal with either race or gender, but using Hine's images in conjunction with those of Riis and with the article by Westbrook (below) or two chapters by Stange (above) might encourage students to consider the nature of photographic "reality," bias in visual images, and how visual perception changes our understanding of the past.

Thomas, Samuel J. "Teaching America's GAPE (or any other period) with Political Cartoons: A Systematic Approach to Primary Source Analysis." *The History Teacher* 37 (August 2004): 425-446. *Contains annotated bibliography and decent image quality.*

Westbrook, Robert. "Lewis Hine and the Two Faces of Progressive Photography." In *Major Problems in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era*. Ed. Leon Fink. Lexington, MA: Heath, 1993.

World War I

Schur, Joan Brodsky. "Photographs of the 369th Infantry and African Americans during World War I. The Constitution Community: The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930)." U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/369th-infantry/>>.

World War II

"Powers of Persuasion: Poster Art of World War II." U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/wwii-posters/>>.

Students may easily understand how the government used images to shape its notions of the ideal male and female citizen during the war. Teachers may need to push students to consider the extent to which such gendered ideals were also implicitly "raced," as the images depict the "ideal" wartime citizen as white.

Perry, Douglas. "Documents and Photographs related to Japanese Relocation during World War II. The Constitution Community: The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945)." U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/japanese-relocation/>>.

Civil Rights Movement

Kelly, Kerry C. "The Many Faces of Paul Robeson. The Constitution Community: Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s)." U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/robeson/>>.

Vietnam

Clark, Linda Darus. "The War in Vietnam: A Story in Photographs. The Constitution Community: Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s)." U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/vietnam-photos/>>.

The photographs of women as nurses versus men as soldiers might spark discussion of the role of gender in the military across time. This lesson might also be interesting in conjunction with:

Evans, Sara. "Sons, Daughters, and Patriarchy: Gender and the 1968 Generation." *American Historical Review* 114 (April 2009): 331-347.

Websites/Blogs

The place I usually turn to first to find images is Google Images (www.google.com/images). However, because even Google is not exhaustive and, more

importantly, because it is sometimes difficult to ascertain an image's creator, title, and date from Google, the websites below can also be helpful:

American Historical Association: Image Resource Roundup, <<http://blog.historians.org/resources/751/image-resource-roundup/>>.
Contains links to interesting and useful collections of images and blogs; for instance, the Flickr site listed below was first located here.

ARTstor, <<http://www.artstor.org/>>.
Your institution will need to purchase a subscription to this database.

Digital History: Using New Technologies to Enhance Teaching and Research, <<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/images.cfm>>.
Compilation of other websites by subject. For instance, you can scroll down to African Americans, Daguerreotypes, Federal Government Images, Holocaust, Portraits, Science and Technology, Trials and Court Cases, or World War II to find a list of related websites. Visual-specific categories like Architecture or Art are also listed.

Flickr: The Commons, <<http://www.flickr.com/commons/>>.
Contains links to public photographic collections from around the world, including the Biblioteca de Arte—Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Bibliothèque de Toulouse, Brooklyn Museum, George Eastman House, Library of Congress, The Library of Virginia, National Galleries of Scotland, National Maritime Museum, National Media Museum, New York Public Library, Oregon State University, Powerhouse Museum Collection, Smithsonian Institution, State Library of New South Wales, and many more.

The Ohio State University Cartoon Library & Museum, <<http://cartoons.osu.edu>>.
Has a great section on Thomas Nast; see <<http://cartoons.osu.edu/nast/>>.

Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Reading Room, <<http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/>>.

LIFE Photo Archive, <<http://images.google.com/hosted/life/>>.
Contains images (not only photographs) from 1750 to the present.

National Archives and Records Administration, <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/>>.
"Teaching With Documents: Lesson Plans."

Picturing U.S. History: An Interactive Resource for Teaching with Visual Evidence, <<http://picturinghistory.gc.cuny.edu>>.

Particularly good resource for its related articles and lesson plans.
Review by Jessica Pritchard, "Picturing U.S. History: An Interactive Resource for Teaching with Visual Evidence," 3 November 2008, <<http://blog.historians.org/resources/645/picturing-us-history-an-interactive-resource-for-teaching-with-visual-evidence/>>.

Courses

Center For Historic American Visual Culture, American Antiquarian Society, Massachusetts, <<http://www.americanantiquarian.org/chavicsummer2009.htm>>.
Paul J. Erickson, Director of Academic Programs, American Antiquarian Society, 508-471-2158, perickson@mwa.org.