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ENG 355 A
The Photograph as a Literary Text
First Paper/Writing Project
February 16, 2012

The first unit of our course has consisted of an introduction to the work of some of the most important photographers of the last century and a review of creative interactions between them and various writers. The purpose of the first paper/writing project is to give you a chance to select and reflect on particular works and how you understand the creative interactions. Here are some prompts or suggestions for writing. If you can design an original topic for writing, and I encourage you to do so, please let me know your plans before you start. Your journals should be helpful in writing these papers, so be sure to review them as you plan to write. Papers are due in class on Tuesday, February 28.

1. An "analysis" paper. Choose the work of one photographer we have studied, and as many photographs as you need, and write an essay in which you explain your sense of the photographer's style and aesthetic, how the various elements of the photographs compose their effects. Please review the class handout "Basic Strategies in Reading Photographs," which presents a "General Vocabulary Used in Photography." Another good source, of course, is our textbook by Jane M. Rabb, and you may also feel free to include research sources as well. One guiding theme we have in the course is the literary potential or influence of photographs on writers, and you should include some sense of that in your discussion. Please include copies of photographs.
2. A "creative" paper, with analysis. Choose a photograph, or a series of photographs, as the model of inspiration for writing a poem or a story ("flash fiction"?). Please see the class handout that accompanied the photographs by Helen Levitt, on which we wrote an exercise in class. The handout offered some possible ways of approaching writing about photographs, but you may have some of your own. See also the "Questions to Ponder" and "Some Famous First Words," on the first few pages of the course syllabus. After you have gotten a draft of your poem or story down, write a three page essay or commentary on your purpose and process. The sources I suggest in the first topic above apply here as well. Please include a copy of the photograph or photographs along with your paper.
3. Diane Arbus said, "Photography is a secret about a secret, the more it tells you the less you know." What do you think Arbus meant by this statement? What literary possibilities seem inherent in it? Do any of Arbus's photographs offer you a clue to what she might mean? Or photographs by others? Consider these questions in a paper about Arbus. Feel free to read up on Arbus for material to support your ideas.
4. The famous Beat writer Jack Kerouac wrote an enthusiastic introduction to a collection of photographs by Robert Frank, *The Americans*. What does Kerouac find to praise in

Frank's approaches and effects in his photographs? How does Kerouac's appreciation of Frank's work match up with his own ideas about writing in "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (class handout)? Find some of Frank's photographs in Google Images and discuss them in a paper about Kerouac and Frank. Please include copies of photographs.

5. Paul Lisicky's short short story "Snapshot, Harvey Cedars, 1948" and Sharon Olds' poem "I Go Back to May 1937" (class handouts) both seem to address issues in the history of a family by focusing on a photograph or the idea of a photograph. Write a paper of comparison/contrast on these works that addresses their photographic and literary ramifications.
6. William Carlos Williams' famous poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" can be said to reflect his interest in and appreciation of photography. (See his discussion of the photographs of Walker Evans, in our book.) How does the poem seem of or like a photograph? Be sure to consider both the content and the form of the poem, or the idea that the form *is* the content. For another example of a Williams poem with photographic implications, see "The Great Figure," below.

THE GREAT FIGURE

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
firetruck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city.

7. Exhibition assignment. Choose a few of the photographs in the Smithsonian Traveling Exhibition "The Way We Worked" that is up at the Churchill Museum now. What does the experience of viewing the photographs in a museum exhibition contribute to your sense of their effects? What kind of story do these "documentary" photographs tell? What relationships do you see between photography and history? For background on the exhibition, you can consult the Smithsonian website, as well as other sources, such as Studs Terkel's oral history *Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel about What They Do*.

Length: About five pages of writing, plus copies of photographs as needed.