

Ansel Adams and Dorothea Lange at Manzanar: Photojournalistic Activism and the Japanese American Incarceration

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Authors' Note: *The COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by a wave of racially motivated intimidation and violence against Asian Americans. The reporting forum Stop AAPI Hate has documented 3,800 incidents of verbal harassment, shunning, physical assault, civil rights violations, and online harassment aimed at Asian Americans between March of 2020 and February of 2021. Similarly, the Pew Research Center found that during this same period, nearly four in ten Asian American adults said they were more likely to be the victims of racism than in the past.¹ However, Asian Americans have long faced hostility in the United States, particularly in times of national panic, and have been treated as perpetual outsiders. In spite of the myriad of experiences that define this diverse community, Asian American history is nearly absent from U.S. history state standards.²*

In the face of a long history of anti-Asian racism, as well as its precarious place in many social studies classrooms, we offer an inquiry-based lesson on photojournalistic activism around Japanese American incarceration. In this article we use the term “incarceration,” rather than the more commonly used “internment” and “relocation.” Scholars have recently argued that internment is a process reserved for prisoners of war and civilian enemy nationals during wartime. The majority of people who fell victim to this policy were American citizens, and therefore from a legal standpoint, their confinement and subsequent loss of property and civil rights does not fall within the definition of internment.³ This lesson offers students a more nuanced examination than they are likely to read in their textbooks, and it also provides two models for how White allies responded to these massive human rights violations. We also aim to disrupt the notion that Japanese Americans were passive victims of incarceration, a troubling theme across state-level content standards.⁴

Our lesson centers on the work of two prominent White photographers: Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams. We chose to

highlight Lange and Adams's work not because of a lack of representative images taken by incarcerated Japanese Americans, as Toyo Miyatake, himself incarcerated at Manzanar, created and later had many of his images of camp life published.⁵ Rather, we chose to highlight their work for two reasons. First, we used their work as an example of what it looks like when photojournalists do not remain neutral and risk their reputation to highlight injustice and promote social change. Lange and Adams's work serves as a reminder that responses to injustice are the responsibility of all. Second, they are an important, if not overlooked teaching resource, as the vast majority of their images are in the public domain, freely available via the National Archives or Library of Congress online catalogs.⁶ Together with the film negatives and text, the photos comprise an unparalleled collection offering unique opportunities for the social studies classroom. In concluding this article, we offer some implications for expanding this lesson to also include the voices of Japanese Americans.

Ansel Adams and Dorothea Lange's photojournalist activism during World War II was a direct response to President Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 (EO 9066), which led to the incarceration of 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans in 10 camps across seven mostly western states. The incarceration was an illegal, racist, haphazard, and illogical event. Approximately two-thirds of those imprisoned were U.S. citizens. Japanese and Japanese Americans living in many other parts of the country were not imprisoned; and only one percent of those living in Hawai'i were incarcerated, despite the islands' location in the actual Pacific theater of war. In 1983, the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians estimated that incarcerated lost an estimated \$2.5 to \$6.2 billion in property and entitlements. President Ronald Reagan later described the incarceration as “a grave wrong” and “a mistake.”⁷



Original Caption: Oakland, California. Young evacuee of Japanese ancestry guarding the family belongings near the Wartime Civil Control Administration station. In half an hour the evacuation bus will depart for Tanforan Assembly center.



Original Caption: Manzanar Relocation Center, Manzanar, California. An elementary school with voluntary attendance has been established with volunteer evacuee teachers, most of whom are college graduates. No school equipment is as yet obtainable and available tables and benches are used. However, classes are often held in the shade of the barrack building at this War Relocation Authority center.

Ansel Adams's response to the injustice is compelling and surprising because he is best known as a seminal landscape photographer of the western United States. In 1942, Adams was invited by Manzanar War Relocation Center director Ralph Merritt to photograph incarcerated Japanese Americans in northern California. Adams's work at Manzanar would culminate in the controversial, though mostly forgotten book, *Born Free and Equal: The Story of Loyal Japanese-Americans*.⁸

Lange was in a very different photographic position than Adams, despite bringing extensive and applauded experience from documenting the social effects of the Great Depression on behalf of the Farm Security Administration. When the War Relocation Authority (WRA) hired Lange in 1942 to document the implementation of EO 9066, she learned early on that her work was being censored, as U.S. Army personnel wrote "impounded" across her finished prints. This knowledge may have freed her to portray the internment in a more explicitly critical way. Although Lange's images were publicly available after the war through the National Archives, and many digital scans are now available through the archives.gov website, a vast majority of the images were unpublished until the California Historical Society printed highlights of Lange's work in 1972.⁹

This article spotlights Lange's critical style as it appears in two such "impounded" images. One image (above) is of 12-year-old Kimiko Kitagaki as she awaits forced departure with her family

in Oakland, California. The other features elementary-age girls participating in a makeshift school at Manzanar incarceration camp (top right).

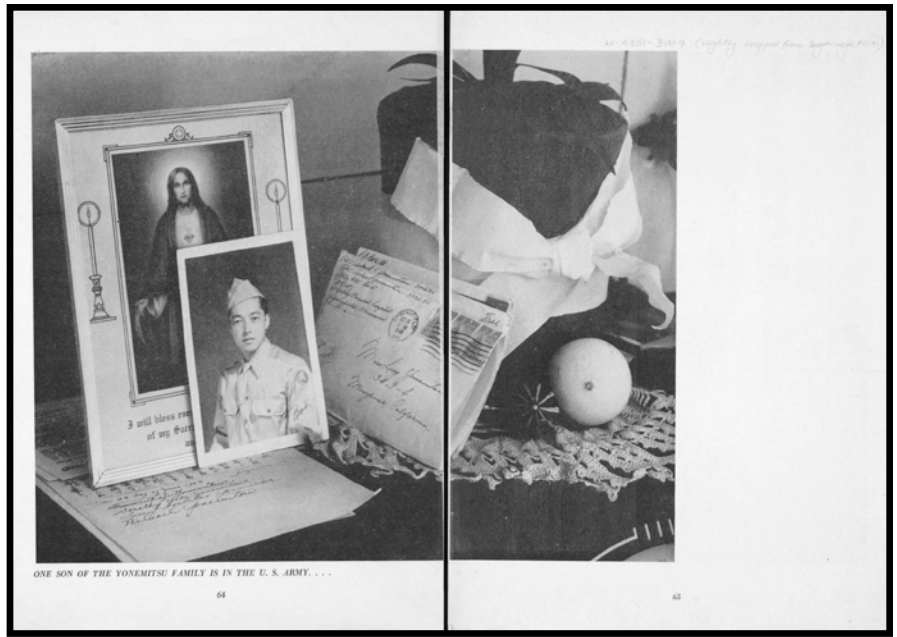
In the photo of Kimiko Kitagaki, Lange presents the child in a somber and tearful moment in Oakland. In the following hour, Kitagaki and her family would be relocated to Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno, California, a converted horse racetrack used to house Japanese Americans before they could be moved to the soon-to-be completed incarceration camps. Kitagaki's mouth is slightly downturned, conveying a melancholy moment. Kitagaki wears an identification tag assigned to all who were to be detained in the camps.¹⁰

Historian Linda Gordon noted that this photo represented both a rare and a familiar strategy for Lange:

Here we meet a motif, both visual and emotional, that runs throughout the internment photographs: waiting in line. It is Lange at her best, creating a visual metaphor for the dehumanization of the prisoners... We see now that what is being stolen is not only farms and education and businesses and jobs but also personal identity. Individuals are registered, numbered, inoculated, tagged, categorized... exiled, inspected, billeted, surveilled.¹¹



“Americanism is a matter of the mind and heart.” Adams, A. (1944). *Born Free and Equal: Photographs of the Loyal Japanese-Americans at Manzanar Relocation Center, Inyo County, California* (New York, NY: U.S. Camera): 59



“One son of the Yonemitsu family is in the U.S. army...” Adams, A. (1944). *Born Free and Equal: Photographs of the Loyal Japanese-Americans at Manzanar Relocation Center, Inyo County, California* (New York, NY: U.S. Camera): 64–65.

Although Lange employed a consistent theme here—the disappearance of a prisoner’s individuality—this picture was also a rarity in that she focused on a person’s “uniquely painful” moment. Gordon noted: “Despite being infuriated, [Lange] retained her typical restraint, as did her subjects. There are very few tear jerkers, like the girl weeping at the [Wartime Civil Control Administration] station.”¹²

Similar in some ways to the photo of Kitagaki, Lange’s photo of elementary-age girls in Manzanar focuses on the mundane and the unflattering. Here, young girls participate in a makeshift school behind a barracks. The girls, wearing dresses, sit in the dirt at what Lange described as a school with “voluntary attendance,” as “no school equipment is as yet obtainable.” Historians Gordon and Gary Okihiro described these depictions of incarcerated as evidence that Lange “did not reduce them or simplify their complexity” despite their oppression.¹³ Also implicit in this image is a sense of resistance. Despite humiliating conditions, Japanese Americans maintained their humanity through culture, art, agriculture, and in this case, education.

The U.S. military’s immediate censoring of Lange’s photographs deprived wartime America of her complex and critical perspective of the incarceration. Pervasive myths persisted that Lange’s work had remained sequestered after the war, but as National Archives staff member Kerri Lawson pointed out in 2017, there was no plot to conceal Lange’s images. Nicholas

Natanson, an archivist in the National Archives Still Picture Branch, said, “The bulk of Lange’s WRA imagery was withheld from the public during World War II... [but] this withholding ended after the war.” Even though publicly accessible within the National Archives, Lange’s images remained mostly unseen to the public until 1972, when the M. H. de Young and Berkeley Art Museums exhibited a few dozen images, and the California Historical Society published a book by Masie and Richard Conrat titled, *Executive Order 9066: The Internment of 110,000 Japanese-Americans*.¹⁴

Adams shared Lange’s outrage at the incarceration but focused on humanizing the people who were about to be released and return to civilian life.¹⁵ These objectives are particularly evident in two of Adams’s images from *Born Free and Equal*. One photograph (top left) is of a smiling girl, Yeko Yamamoto, who sports a popular 1940s hairstyle. Another (top right) is of the Yonemitsu family’s tabletop display with Judeo-Christian iconography and a picture of, and letters from, their military-serving son, Robert.

In the photograph of the Yonemitsu household, Adams illuminated the bitter contradiction for families whose sons fought for the U.S. military while other family members were imprisoned by the U.S. government. The image shows a printed photo of Robert, who is dressed in a U.S. Army uniform. Next to the photo is a letter addressed to his mother, Lucy, and the return

address is a hospital in Springfield, Missouri. Nearby is a card with a picture of Jesus Christ and phrases from a Christian prayer. Names of four Yonemitsu family members are listed on a piece of paper. Adams captioned this photo: “One son of the Yonemitsu Family is in the U.S. Army...”¹⁶

By ending the caption with ellipses, Adams appeared to highlight the tension over the U.S. government imprisoning an American family whose child was fighting on behalf of that same government. Adams observed that this situation was “a severe contradiction of the principles for which they were fighting the war.... It was a nightmare situation.” Of this particular image, Adams biographer Mary Alinder said that “Ansel quietly captured the irony of the son fighting for a country that had imprisoned his parents.”¹⁷

In the image and caption for Yeko Yamamoto, Adams challenged the racist assumptions behind the incarceration. Yamamoto is sporting a trendy 1940s hairstyle, the Victory Roll (a.k.a., the Victory Curl). The image’s caption, “Americanism is a matter of heart and mind,” reminds readers that being American is a personal feeling and not heritage-based—in contrast to the message of mass incarceration. “Ansel emphasized that these were individuals, as American as any other citizen,” said Alinder.¹⁸

Some scholars criticized Adams for photographs such as this for portraying smiling detainees. More blunt critique came from Lange, who had once collaborated with Adams on photo projects. Though some of her own images featured smiling detainees, Lange called Adams’s cheerful portrayals “shameful” and “ignorant.”¹⁹

Nevertheless, one of Adams’s objectives at Manzanar was to humanize Japanese Americans—not just to exhibit outrage at their incarceration. Historian Anne Hammond wrote that Adams “wished to achieve recognition on the part of ordinary Americans that Japanese Americans were in very many ways just like them, not degraded or dejected in their racial difference.”

Teaching Suggestions

These original photographs, negatives, and text from Adams and Lange offer unique opportunities for the social studies classroom. Together, they comprise an unparalleled collection from artists of such stature. The vast majority of these images are in the public domain, freely available via DocsTeach, the online tool for teaching with documents from the National Archives, or the National Archives or Library of Congress online catalogs.

1. Lead students in a jigsaw analysis of the images by Lange and Adams, using the National Archives Photo Analysis Worksheet.²⁰ The worksheet helps students analyze the photos through a four-step process:

- Meet the photo
- Observe its parts

- Try to make sense of it
- Use it as historical evidence

After students have completed their photo analysis, ask each student group to consider the following questions, utilizing both the photo *and* its caption.

- How did Adams and/or Lange use a particular photograph and caption to describe their subjects?
- What ideas were the photographers trying to communicate to the viewer about the subjects?

These group questions will prepare students for a culminating, whole-class dialogue around several discussion points:

- “Using specifics from the images and text, what kind of message do you think these photographs produced for people viewing them? (Students can address this question for people during World War II, in the present, or both.)
- “How do people balance advocating for justice with not getting fired from their job?”

The final question can serve as a springboard for discussing the broader struggle for civil rights that spans U.S. history as well as social-justice activism around current topics young citizens face.

2. Scaffold the above photo analysis activity with the voices of incarcerated Japanese Americans, compiled by the Densho organization. Densho’s mission is “To preserve and share history of the World War II incarceration of Japanese Americans to promote equity and justice today.”²¹

Visit the “narratives” section to browse the nearly 1,000 individual oral histories. These interviews are available under a Creative Commons license, which means they may be used freely for non-commercial purposes, if properly cited. 🌐

Notes

1. Russell Jeung, Aggie Yellow Horse, Tara Popovic, and Richard Lim, “Stop AAPI Hate National Report,” Stop AAPI Hate (March 2020-February 2021), <https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Stop-AAPI-Hate-Report-National-210316.pdf>; Neil G. Ruiz, Juliana M. Horowitz, Christine Tamir, “Many Black and Asian Americans Say They Have Experienced Discrimination Amid the COVID-19 Outbreak,” Pew Research Center (July 1, 2020), www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/07/01/many-black-and-asian-americans-say-they-have-experienced-discrimination-amid-the-covid-19-outbreak.
2. Sohyun An, “Asian Americans in American history: An AsianCrit Perspective on Asian American Inclusion in State U.S. History Curriculum Standards,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 44, no. 2 (2016), 244–276; An, “Disrupting Curriculum of Violence on Asian Americans,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 42, no. 2 (2020), 141–156.
3. We echo Noreen Naseem Rodriguez’s call for educators to avoid “euphemisms

- that mollify the fact that tens of thousands of U.S. citizens suffered forced removal, seizure of property, and imprisonment, surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards for years,” by using the more exact terms “incarceration” and “prison camp.” For more, see Noreen Naseem Rodríguez, “But They Didn’t Do Nothin’ Wrong! Teaching about the Japanese-American Incarceration,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 30, no. 2 (2017): 18; Rodríguez, “Focus on Friendship or Fights for Civil Rights? Teaching Difficult History of Japanese American Incarceration through The Bracelet,” *Bank Street Occasional Paper Series* 220, no. 44 (2020), <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2020/iss44/6/>; Roger Daniels, “Words Do Matter: A Note on Inappropriate Terminology and the Incarceration of the Japanese Americans,” in *Nikkei in the Pacific Northwest: Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Louis Fiset (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 2005), 183–207.
4. Robert S. Chang, “Toward an Asian American Legal Scholarship: Critical Race Theory, Poststructuralism, and Narrative Space,” *California Law Review* 19 (1993), 1243–1323; Mark Selden, “Remembering ‘The Good War’: The Atomic Bombing and the Internment of Japanese Americans in U.S. History Textbooks,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 3, no. 5 (2005), www.japanfocus.org/-Mark-Selden/1943/article.html.
 5. Paul Miyatake (translator), Atsufume Miyatake (editor), Taisuke Fujishima (editor), Takaaki Bando (editor), Toyo Petite (author), *Toyo Miyatake: Behind the Lens* (Tokyo, Japan: Bungeishunju, 1984).
 6. The complete photographic file of Lange’s work can be found in the National Archives’s Central Photographic File of the War Relocation Authority, 1942–1945 (Records Group 210), <https://tinyurl.com/mrvmyys9>; the entire text and photographs from *Born Free and Equal: The Story of Loyal Japanese-Americans* can be found on the Library of Congress website: www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/manz/book.html.
 7. Rodríguez, 17–23; An, 244–276; Franklin D. Roosevelt, Executive Order 9066, www.docsteach.org/documents/document/executive-order-9066; Elizabeth M. Frye and Lisa A. Hash, “The Voices of Children: Re-imagining the Internment of Japanese Americans through Poetry,” *Social Studies & the Young Learner* 25, no. 4 (2013): 30–32; Wesley G. Pippert, “The Economic Losses of Japanese-Americans Interned During World War II. UPI Archives (June 15, 1983) www.upi.com/Archives/1983/06/15/The-economic-losses-of-Japanese-Americans-interned-during-World-War/5877424497600/; President Reagan’s Remarks and Signing Ceremony for the Japanese-American Internment Compensation Bill (HR 442), *The Reagan Library* (August 10, 1988) www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcaQRhcBXY
 8. Ansel Adams, *Born Free and Equal: The Story of Loyal Japanese-Americans* (New York, N.Y.: U.S. Camera, 1944).
 9. Kerri Lawrence, “Correcting the Record on Dorothea Lange’s Japanese Internment Photos,” National Archives, www.archives.gov/news/articles/japanese-internment-75th-anniversary; Masie Conrat and Richard Conrat, *Executive Order 9066: The Internment of 110,000 Japanese-Americans* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Anderson, Ritchie, & Simon, 1972), <https://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC/AmRad/executive9066.pdf>
 10. Photograph 210-G-C579; Oakland, California. Young evacuee of Japanese ancestry guarding the family belongings near the Wartime Civil Control Administration station; 5/6/1942; Central Photographic File of the War Relocation Authority, 1942–1945; Records of the War Relocation Authority, Record Group 210; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Md. [Online Version, www.docsteach.org/documents/document/young-evacuee-family-belongings, July 8, 2021]
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 12. Gordon, 321.
 13. Photograph 210-G-C665; Manzanar Relocation Center, Manzanar, California. An elementary school with voluntary attendance has been established with volunteer evacuee teachers, most of whom are college graduates, 7/1/1942; Central Photographic File of the War Relocation Authority, 1942–1945; Records of the War Relocation Authority, Record Group 210; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Md. [Online Version, www.docsteach.org/documents/document/school-children-manzanar, July 8, 2021]; Linda Gordon and Gary Y. Okihiro, *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment* (New York, N.Y.: Norton, 2006): 36.
 14. Lawrence; Matthew Harrison Tedford, “Once Suppressed Dorothea Lange Photographs Capture Wartime Paranoia,” (KQED, May 10, 2017), www.kqed.org/arts/13156032/once-suppressed-dorothea-lange-photographs-capture-wartime-paranoia.
 15. Adams, 7, 9, 101–105, 108–110.
 16. Adams, 64–65.
 17. Gerald H. Robinson, *Elusive Truth: Four Photographers at Manzanar* (Nevada City, Calif.: Carl Mautz Publishing, 2002), 28; Mary Street Alinder, *Ansel Adams* (New York, N.Y.: Henry Holt, 1996): 234.
 18. Adams, 59; Alinder, 233.
 19. Karin Becker Ohrn, “What You See Is What You Get: Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams at Manzanar,” *Journalism History* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 19; Suzanne Reiss, “Dorothea Lange, The Making of a Documentary Photographer” (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Regional Oral History Office, 1968), 190, https://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/roho/ucb/text/lange_dorothea__w.pdf
 20. The National Archives’s “Analyze a Photograph” teaching resource can be found at: www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/worksheets/photo_analysis_worksheet.pdf; the National Archives has collected educator resources related to Japanese incarceration during World War II at: www.archives.gov/education/lessons/japanese-relocation. There are also more than 130 primary sources in DocsTeach, at <http://ow.ly/x36e50FrGCR>
 21. Densho.org, “Densho Digital Depository,” <https://ddr.densho.org>.



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