

THE POWER OF DOCUMENTATION: Photography During the Incarceration

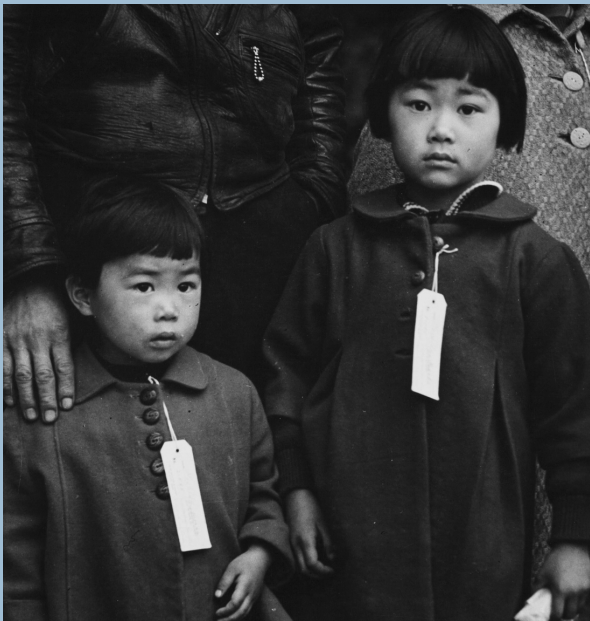
During World War II, a government agency called the War Relocation Authority (WRA) handled the forced removal and incarceration of Japanese Americans. Though it seems counterintuitive, the WRA wanted photographers to document their actions. But they had strong ideas about the kind of photographs they wanted the photographers to take.

One of the country's most celebrated photographers, Ansel Adams, photographed Japanese American incarceratedees at Manzanar. What do you notice about the photos Adams took?



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The photos below were taken by a woman named Dorothea Lange. Lange was initially hired by the WRA, but she was eventually fired. Her photos were confiscated and impounded. What do you notice about her photographs?
In what ways are her photos different from Adams's?



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When Lange's photos were impounded, she mourned what she saw as her failure to help those in need. Over a year after her firing, Lange wrote to Adams, who was then considering photographing Japanese Americans and the incarceration. She said: "I fear the intolerance and prejudice is constantly growing. We have a disease. It's [...] hatred. You have a job on your hands to do to make a dent in it – but I don't know a more challenging nor more important one. I went through an experience I'll never forget when I was working on it and learned a lot, even if I accomplished nothing."

Ultimately Adams decided to take the photos. In a letter written in 1965, he wrote the following: "The purpose of my work was to show how these people, suffering under a great injustice, and loss of property, businesses and professions, had overcome the sense of defeat and despair [sic] by building for themselves a vital community in an arid (but magnificent) environment.... All in all, I think this Manzanar Collection is an important historical document, and I trust it can be put to good use."

Lange and Adams took different kinds of photos. While Adams's photos reached more people at the time, Lange's contributions have had an impact in more modern times.



PHOTOS BY DOROTHEA LANGE

WHAT DO YOU THINK? Lange worried that she had "accomplished nothing" because her photos were withheld from the public view at the time. To her, the fact that they weren't seen meant that they didn't stop the incarceration from happening, or even shorten it.

Do you agree that she was a failure? Why or why not?

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After Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans were forced to surrender their cameras, along with items like weapons and radios. This ban extended into the prison camps. However, an imprisoned photographer named Tōyō Miyatake (left) brought a lens into the Manzanar prison camp and constructed a wooden camera so that he could secretly take photos of camp life. And at another camp, Topaz incarceree Dave Tatsuno carried a video camera disguised in a shoebox.

Over the next few years, camp authorities relaxed their rules about photography in the camp, and more Japanese Americans documented camp life. Today, the photos Japanese Americans took of their own communities are essential to history's record of the Japanese American incarceration.

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT FOR INDIVIDUALS WITHIN A COMMUNITY TO DOCUMENT THEIR OWN EXPERIENCES?

How might a photographer's background inform their work?

What access do members of the community have that outsiders do not?

Why is it important to allow marginalized groups to define themselves?

What is erasure, and how can we avoid it?