The bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese Navy on December 7, 1941 sent the United States into a fervor of anger and hysteria. As some Americans came together with a sense of patriotism and purpose, others looked toward the nation’s Asian populations—especially those of Japanese ancestry— with renewed suspicion. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt signed an executive order permitting the military to contain and incarcerate any group it deemed hazardous to national security. Within weeks approximately 120,000 persons of Japanese descent, most of them US citizens or legal immigrants, found themselves under orders of evacuation. Forced to liquidate their assets and relocate to remote Federal internment camps, these Japanese Americans faced both the physical hardships of incarceration and the moral violation of their rights as citizens and individuals.

Located on the dry and inhospitable eastern shoulder of California’s Sierra Nevada range, the camp at Manzanar opened as a confinement site for more than 11,000 Japanese Americans. Manzanar was opened in March 1942 and not closed until November 1945—three months after the end of US hostilities with Japan. During the camp’s operation, the leading American photographers Ansel Adams, Clem Albers, Dorothea Lange, and Toyo Miyatake all documented the physical, cultural, and psychological conditions of camp life. Their pictures capture a poignant and critical record of the Japanese American internment experience. Crafted from different angles, their combined work interrogates the complex human responses to injustice. In one picture, the camp’s public square—its dusty earth marked by the letters “A” and “R,” and impoverished buildings serve in Lange’s photographs as ciphers of the prisoners’ forced resettlement at the camp. As a whole, the pictures provide a poignant narration of the experience, from a farewell message whitewashed onto a storefront window to plates capturing thelimb of the train journey and the austerity of the camp’s tarpaper barracks. His images of life in the camp, produced over two days in early April, offer unexpectedly straightforward evidence of the camp’s transient and martial reality. This seemingly unfiltered aspect of Albers’s photographs—his are among the few to feature an explicit military presence—suggested he was given relatively free rein in his selection of subjects.

In assigning photographers such as Albers to document the camp, the federal government sought to achieve four primary goals: to inform the public about the relocation; to demonstrate the government’s attention to national security, to propagate its equitable treatment and benevolent stewardship of Japanese Americans; and to produce historical records of the program. The photographs that Albers made sometimes subverted, but mostly belied, these ambitions. A picture of an armed military policeman with fixed bayonet renders explicit the camp’s basis in force. A photograph of young women decorating a barracks bedroom does the same work in more complicated ways; its feigned grins and staged exuberance evokes the nation’s desire to paper over the violation of citizen rights.

Dorothea Lange

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the US Army took responsibility for controlling the nation’s so-called “enemy aliens” and orchestrated the forced removal of Japanese Americans from the general citizenry. Management of the internment camps, however, fell to a newly created civilian agency: the War Relocation Authority. Ironically, the agency’s personnel did not view themselves as captors, but rather as caretakers of a population whose US loyalties could not help but be subverted by their Japanese race and heritage. According to the WRA, the goal was to “reestablish the evacuated people as a productive segment of the American population.” Yet even while some Americans may have seen the Japanese American incarceration as prudent, the war had only further demonstrated the nation’s Asian populations—especially those of Japanese ancestry—undercut official justifications for incarceration and threatened to reveal American idealism as fiction. In one picture, the camp’s public square—its dusty earth marked by the letters “A” and “R,” and impoverished buildings serve in Lange’s photographs as ciphers of the prisoners’ forced resettlement at the camp. As a whole, the pictures provide a poignant narration of the experience, from a farewell message whitewashed onto a storefront window to plates capturing thelimb of the train journey and the austerity of the camp’s tarpaper barracks. His images of life in the camp, produced over two days in early April, offer unexpectedly straightforward evidence of the camp’s transient and martial reality. This seemingly unfiltered aspect of Albers’s photographs—his are among the few to feature an explicit military presence—suggests he was given relatively free rein in his selection of subjects.

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Hired along with Albers in March 1942, Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) came to the WRA with a rich background in government photography gained through her work for the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression. She also possessed a deep dedication to social justice and a fine-grained understanding of the camera as a tool for cultural indictment. Lange’s photographs at Manzanar, taken on July 1 and July 2, 1942 when the camp was still under construction but already fully operational, assert the contradictions of Japanese American incarceration had grown increasingly apparent. Yet wartime racism had not waned and Adams was himself deeply divided. An ardent patriot, Adams had volunteered for the war shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Moreover, his landscape photographs had long evoked not only a sense of nature as aesthetic perfection, but also a deep, transcendent vision of American exceptionalism. The war with their forced resettlement at the camp. As a whole, the pictures provide a poignant narration of the experience, from a farewell message whitewashed onto a storefront window to plates capturing thelimb of the train journey and the austerity of the camp’s tarpaper barracks. His images of life in the camp, produced over two days in early April, offer unexpectedly straightforward evidence of the camp’s transient and martial reality. This seemingly unfiltered aspect of Albers’s photographs—his are among the few to feature an explicit military presence—suggests he was given relatively free rein in his selection of subjects.

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Japan endangered these values, yet too too did the injustice enacted upon Japanese Americans at Manzanar. Finding himself in a tight spot, Adams tried to find a middle ground. Largely avoiding the obvious racism of the incarceration, he crafted photographs that highlighted the inherent humanity and loyalty of the camp’s internees. In particular, Adams downplayed his subjects’ Japanese ancestry by steeping them in an iconography of Americanism, from agriculture to baseball.

For Adams, the most potent symbol of Americanness took shape in the natural landscape that surrounded Manzanar. The region’s high peaks and vast plains offered more than a sublime backdrop; they provided direct visual evidence of Japanese American assimilation. Posed against monuments simultaneously natural and national, the lives of the internees were imbued with both the aesthetic force of Adams’ photography and the Western mythos of American identity. Pictures of incarcerees working as farmers in the fields or standing in storerooms full of harvested crops speak to an American legacy of agriculture, industriousness, and productivity. A photograph of the camp’s cemetery monument standing against the high Sierra backdrop similarly sublimates Japanese ancestry into an identifiably American nature.

Photographer Tōyō Miyatake (1875-1979) was among the Japanese Americans relocated to Manzanar in 1942. A first generation immigrant, Miyatake came to the United States in 1909, trained as an artistic and commercial photographer, and in 1923 opened a successful studio in the Little Tokyo neighborhood of downtown Los Angeles. Ordered to the camps, Miyatake smuggled a single camera lens and film holder among his belongings. This choice posed great personal risk; the government classified cameras as weapons of war. If discovered, Miyatake risked separation from his family and reassignment to a more punitive facility. At Manzanar, Miyatake fashioned a camera box out of wood and clandestinely began to make photographs. A year later, through a combination of WRA reforms and Miyatake’s advocacy, he received permission to open a studio inside the camp.

Miyatake at first operated under tight regulation: Japanese Americans could position their sitters, but only a non-Japanese authority could trip the camera shutter. Later, as Japanese military power waned and martial attitudes softened, Miyatake exploited circumstances to photograph more freely and without supervision.

We might imagine that someone in Miyatake’s position would leverage his camera as a means to indict, through documentation, the injustice and inhumanity of racist incarceration. Some of his photographs, especially the celebrated Boys Behind Barbed Wire, operate in precisely this way. Yet, other of Miyatake’s photographs speak to a different purpose, namely that of providing the Manzanar community with pictures that, as historian Jasmine Alinder notes, “told the stories of their everyday lives, ranging from banal to joyous to heart-rending.” Shots of high school drum majorettes posing proudly in uniform, or a budding tree branch poised against the Sierra skyline, conjure a resilience that reclames the freedom of being.

Interrogating Manzanar is organized by the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock and is curated by Jason Weems, Assistant Professor of the History of Art at UCR, and Joanna Suematsu-Myers, CMP Curator of Exhibitions, with contributions from Kathryn Pintokera, CMP Curatorial Assistant. The exhibition was made possible by the generous support of Dr. and Mrs. Ernest and Elaine Nagamatsu, Los Angeles; Dr. and Mrs. Bo and Iyoua Sakaguchi, Northridge; Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; UCR’s College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (CHASS); the Earl Lewis Goldberg Family, Los Angeles; Yuriko K. Livingston, Monterey Park; and Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan S. Gluckman, Los Angeles. Additional support was provided by the City of Riverside.

Photographs by Ansel Adams, Clem Albers, Dorothea Lange, and Tōyō Miyatake

March 14-July 18, 2015
California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock
3824 Main Street, Riverside, CA 92501