

INTERROGATING MANZANAR

Photography, Justice, and the Japanese American Internment

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 groups 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 operated 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 Tōyō 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 internment's masked ideological underpinnings and obvious social injustices. It is only through studying such challenging imagery that new and better sensitivities may emerge.

Clem Albers

Opened on March 22, 1942 as a temporary assembly center, Manzanar became one of ten Japanese American "relocation" camps established under Executive Order 9066. The first internees consisted of Japanese Americans who had volunteered to build the camp. By mid-April, though construction was far from complete, the federal government began transporting expelled Japanese Americans to the site in numbers that reached up to one thousand persons per day. Most of these new internees came from the Los Angeles area, where they had been forcibly evicted from their homes and stripped of their property. By July, the population at Manzanar had ballooned to almost 10,000.

A newspaper photographer for the San Francisco Chronicle, Clem Albers (1903-1990) was among the first to picture life at Manzanar. Hired by the government in March 1942, Albers documented the process of Japanese American internment, from their dispossession in Los Angeles to

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 the limbo 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.

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 propagandize its equitable treatment and benevolent stewardship of Japanese Americans; and to produce historical records of the program. The photographs that Albers made sometimes abetted, 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 evoke 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, it is impossible to ignore the racism that lay at its core. Looks, rather than deeds, became the measure of trustworthiness, and long-held prejudices against Asian "others" were sanctioned as national policy.

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 hardships of incarceration. As in her earlier FSA work, forces of injustice are presented as structural and institutional—well beyond the control of individual Japanese American internees. Often, Manzanar's inhospitable landscape and impoverished buildings serve in Lange's photographs as ciphers of injustice. In one picture, the camp's public square—its dusty earth marked with the tracks of internees and its back edge lined with thin barracks—bears witness to the empty and inhospitable conditions of camp life. In another photograph, a combination of militaristic order, blowing dust, and a snapping American flag lay bare WRA claims of equal treatment.

Yet if injustice has its place in Lange's photographs, so too does resilience. As in her well-known Depression Era images of migrant workers, here Lange reveals complicated possibilities of human agency amidst incarceration. While a photograph of a queue of anonymous prisoner-inhabitants waiting for their allotment of soap implies acquiescence, closely focused portraits such as those of a farm foreman or a young girl capture consequential individuality. By picturing the prisoners as both individuals and members of a community, Lange's photographs cultivate empathy as a lever against inequity. Perhaps for this reason, the WRA suppressed most of this work for the duration of the war.

Ansel Adams

By the end of 1942, camps such as Manzanar had become a fact of wartime life for Japanese Americans. Searching for a measure of stability—and to further demonstrate their loyalty—many captives began to reconstruct their stolen lives within the confines of incarceration. Outside the barbed wire, however, US wartime propaganda spread a more derogatory and racist portrayal of the Japanese as deceitful, blood thirsty, and subhuman. Mixing wartime anger with longstanding anti-Asian sentiments, these representations further impugned the loyalty of Japanese Americans, immigrants and natural born citizens alike. Such hatemongering may have provided the war effort a comfortable (if false) sense of clarity. It did so, however, by shattering beliefs in justice and equality as core principles of American identity. The voluntary enlistment of numerous Japanese Americans in the US armed forces further undercut official justifications for incarceration and threatened to reveal American idealism as fiction.

When Ansel Adams (1902-1984) was invited to photograph Manzanar in 1943, the contradictions of Japanese American incarceration had grown increasingly apparent. Yet wartime racism had not waned and Adams was himself deeply divided. An avowed 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, transcendental vision of American exceptionalism. The war with

2015 WONG FORUM ON ART AND THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

Allies, Enemies, Citizens: Figuring Asianness in World War II America

May 1, 10am-5pm
UCR ARTSblock
3824 Main Street, Riverside, CA 92501

The 2015 Wong Forum on Art and the Immigrant Experience, "Allies, Enemies, Citizens: Figuring Asianness in World War II America," will be hosted by UCR ARTSblock in conjunction with the exhibition *Interrogating Manzanar*. The symposium will focus on the visual representation of Asianness and Asian-Americanness in the United States during World War II, and will feature presentations by leading scholars from across the nation.

"Allies, Enemies, Citizens" is organized by Jason Weems. Generous support has been provided by the Voy and Fay Wong Endowment through the UCR History of Art Department's Wong Forum on Art and the Immigrant Experience.

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Japan endangered these values, yet so 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. Poised 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 incarcerated workers 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.

Tōyō Miyatake

In spite of their empathy, outside photographers faced limitations in conveying the circumstances at Manzanar. Ansel Adams, Clem Albers, and Dorothea Lange found their access to the camp regulated by WRA agents who dictated appropriate subjects and suppressed photographs that challenged the illusion of government fairness and benevolence. Moreover, as citizens whose loyalty remained undisputed, these photographers, visiting only for a day or two, could not fully internalize the insult and injury intrinsic to the Japanese American internment. While their photographs could claim to present Manzanar with a certain documentary accuracy, they also paradoxically aligned with prevailing social currents that positioned people of

Japanese ancestry, in spite of their American allegiances, as cultural "others." After all, documentary photography assumes an almost anthropological separation between the photographer and those portrayed, with the former holding authority. A full accounting of the incarceration experience required that Japanese Americans find means to shape their own images of the camp. The reality of Manzanar needed to be pictured from within the barbed wire by those who lived it.

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 in 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 reclaims the freedom of being.

— Jason Weems

Images: Toyo Miyatake, *Three Boys Behind Barbed Wire*, 1942-45, Courtesy of Alan Miyatake, Toyo Miyatake Studios, San Gabriel; Ansel Adams, *Mt. Williamson, Sierra Nevada from Manzanar, California*, 1944, Collection of the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock, The H.C. Setzer-Alexander/ Friends of Photography Collection, © Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANSEL ADAMS, CLEM ALBERS, DOROTHEA LANGE, AND TŌYŌ MIYATAKE

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