Annus Irén

"THE NATIONAL EYE OF CONSCIENCE"
Dorothea Lange's Images of the Japanese Internment

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Initially, I thought I would pay tribute to Zsazsa with a text developed from a lecture I gave at a symposium we both attended in November 2022. However, as I saw her drying off her tears at the end of my presentation, I realized the topic would not be appropriate. I therefore chose another one – which is not light-hearted either, but stands as testimony to how the impact of a devoted singular woman acting on her conscience will last well beyond the time of those in power who wished to silence her.

1. Introduction

In response to the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt signed *Executive Order 9066* in February 1942, which authorized the military removal of persons who presented a potential danger to the US from military zones designated by regional commanders. As a result, approximately 120,000 inhabitants of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast and in Arizona were moved to relocation centers established further inland and were kept there until March 1946. Throughout these years, various photographers were hired by the US War Relocation Authority (WRA) to document the relocation process, including Dorothea Lange, Ansel Adams, Thomas Parker, Francis Stewart, and Clem Albers. The government wished to use the photographs taken on site as evidence of how orderly and peaceful the internment was and thus to protect themselves "from potential allegations of mistreatment."[1]

This study revisits a selection of images created by Lange in order to grasp the way she captured the internment process and experience, at once also revealing the extent to which her portrayal confirmed governmental claims and expectations. The paper argues that her loyalties were aligned with her own expectations of herself as a documentary photographer, and she documented a nuanced, divergent, and thought-provoking reading of the evacuees' world, having been created by military conditions instituted through government policy. Hers was a documentary counter-narrative to the official standpoint which reinforced ideological constructions that justified American military involvement in the war, domestic consequences notwithstanding. Lange's consistent portrayal of the internees as regular, proper, if not model American citizens carried the implication that any act of disregard or denial of that is an act of betrayal – and that includes *Executive Order 9066* along with the official or historical narratives that justified it. Her pictures, now freely available electronically, provide a visual narrative of the

[1] Linda Gordon and Gary Okihiro. *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 3.

relocation program, which can serve as public evidence on the grounds of which official war narratives can be refined, challenged, and corrected, and similar future actions prevented or protested.

2. Facts of history

December 7, 1941, brought about a complete change in life in the US. The Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service successfully carried out a surprise air strike against the US military base at Pearl Harbor, in Honolulu, Hawaii, prompting President Roosevelt to sign a declaration of war against Japan the following day, along with three presidential proclamations, which declared citizens of Italy, Germany, and Japan who lived within the US without having been naturalized there alien enemies. As a consequence, many of them were soon arrested and interrogated. On February 19, 1942, the President also issued *Executive Order 9066*, which authorized the removal of persons considered a threat to national security to internment camps. As a result, all Japanese American citizens living in the Western military zone were relocated[2] to ten camps situated further inland: in Arizona (Gila River and Poston), Arkansas (Rohwer and Jerome), California (Manzanar and Tule Lake), Colorado (Granada), Idaho (Minidoka), Utah (Topaz), and Wyoming (Heart Mountain). On December 17, 1944 – one day before the public announcement of the Supreme Court decision *Ex Parte Endo* that found the incarceration of innocent civilians unconstitutional – US Major General Henry C. Pratt issued *Public Proclamation No. 21*, declaring that, effective January 2, 1945, Japanese American internees in the Western zone could return to their homes. Two years later, on December 31, 1946, President Truman signed *Proclamation No. 2714*, which ended the hostilities of World War II. It was only on February 19, 1979, however, that President Ford signed a proclamation entitled *An American Promise*, which officially terminated *Executive Order 9066* in particular, and it was only on August 10, 1988, that President Reagan signed the *Civil Liberties Act* that granted reparations to Japanese American internees with a check for $20,000 and an apology from the US government.

3. Keeping records: History, photography, and Dorothea Lange

These historical facts have shaped the life of people of Japanese heritage living in the US as well as their perception in mainstream American society. Since Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse*, we have been intimately aware that historical narratives can be viewed as literary productions, where historical facts are written up to tell "what really happened"[3] through relying on the literary imagination that makes

[2] Jeffrey Burton et al., *Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 1.
[3] Hayden White, "The Historical Text as an Artefact," in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 99.

fiction seem so real.[4] In this vein, it must also be acknowledged that this paper is in fact another piece of narrative produced by the imagination and is a rendering of a visual narrative presented by Lange of the relocation process. Unlike products of the mind, products of machines in depicting reality, such as photography, have long been regarded as providing an "unmediated copy of the real world," as Sturken and Cartwright put it,[5] and thus functioning as the objective source of truth. This paper proceeds from historical texts and turns to this medium to investigate the portrayal of the internment experience of Japanese Americans pursuant to *Executive Order 9066*. Representations, however, are never innocent, even if they are machine-generated visual documents, as the photographer behind the machine shapes the visual narrative, inspired by various positions and considerations.

Lange was a widely known documentary photographer by the 1940s, recognized for the black-and-white images she had created for the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression, in which she captured the devastation, misery, and hopelessness of the migrant existence. When she was approached in 1942 by the US Office of War Information with a new assignment to document the relocation of Japanese Americans from the West Coast to inland internment centers, she immediately accepted the offer. Overseen by the War Relocation Authority, the internment started with the relocation of Japanese Americans from San Francisco on April 7, 1942. Lange lived in Berkeley, California, at the time, which was an ideal location for her to visually capture the process of relocation from the very outset.

Although the agency knew little about Lange's art, they hired her, knowing she had worked for the US government before and had a good reputation[6] and thus automatically presumed that she would faithfully support official policy. They hoped to receive images that proved that the whole process was orderly and humane and that "they weren't persecuting or torturing the people who they evacuated."[7] In addition, the WRA also wanted to use some of the images in their reports "to illustrate its benevolence"[8] in these relocation centers. Lange, however, had refused to serve the propaganda machine of the Farm Security Administration in the 1930s, and she was not going to comply this time either, as she firmly believed that documentary photography's "power lies in the evidence it presents" and that a documentary photographer "has a responsibility of keeping the record

[4] For an example of how images may be employed to accompany different narratives of the very same historical event, see Irén Annus, "The Deaths of General Wolfe," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 13, no. 1-2 (2007): 105-120.
[5] Maria Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 16.
[6] Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: Grab a Hunk of Lightning* (Arlington, VA: PBS, 2014). https://www.pbs.org/video/american-masters-dorothea-lange-grab-hunk-lightning/.
[7] Gordon, *Dorothea Lange.*
[8] Robinson, *Elusive*, 20.

and to keep it superbly well."[9] By accepting the assignment, she wanted to be "the national eye of conscience"[10] that records everything accurately and faithfully.

Lange was documenting the early evacuation process between April 6 and July 3, 1942: the deportation, conditions in the temporary assembly centers in California, and the beginning of camp life in the Manzanar War Relocation Center. Some, such as Robinson, found that her images of the internment did not "quite reach the intensity"[11] of her depictions of the Great Depression and failed to communicate "the rage"[12] she felt about the program, while others, such as Gordon,[13] argued that Lange's images expressed such a powerful criticism of the relocation program that they ended up being banned from public view for decades. Lange did not voice her views of the program during her assignment, but later wrote the following to Adams, who replaced her at Manzanar as the camp photographer: "I fear the intolerance and prejudice is [*sic*] constantly growing. We have a disease. It's Jap-baiting and hatred. You have a job on your hands to make a dent in it – but I do not know a more challenging nor [*sic*] more important one."[14] By then, she must have felt no need to engage in "the complex interplay of the various kinds of practices of distancing,"[15] through which the artistic constitution of the human subject may take place, such as a careful consideration of the "proximity of sameness ... self-irony and ... shared interests,"[16] as she was free of the task of record keeping and could voice her view freely as just a regular American citizen.

4. Documenting the relocation process

Executive Order 9066 initiated a forced relocation process, during which American citizens and residents of Japanese descent living within the Western military zone were given one week to wrap up their entire lives and prepare for removal. Initially, many of them were shipped to nearby assembly centers. Then, with the completion of the relocation centers further inland – which were often just makeshift barracks surrounded by barbed-wire fences – they were sent off to their

[9] Quoted in Gordon and Okihiro, *Impounded*, 12.
[10] Quoted in Gordon and Okihiro, *Impounded*, 12.
[11] Gerald Robinson, *Elusive Truths: Four Photographers at Manzanar* (Nevada City, CA: Carl Mautz. 2002), 38.
[12] Robinson, *Elusive*, 47.
[13] Gordon and Okihiro, *Impounded*, 3.
[14] Quoted in Akiko Ichikawa, "How the Photography of Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams Told the Story of Japanese American Internment." *Hyperallergic*, September 1, 2015. https://www.academia.edu/30525718/How_the_Photography_of_Dorothea_Lange_and_Ansel_Adams_Told_the_Story_of_Japanese_American_Internment.
[15] Erzsébet Barát, "The Politics and Ethics of Visual Representation: Beyond Moralizing Spectatorship (?)," in *Film i Knjizevost*, edited by Maija Grujic and Kristijan Olah (Belgrade: Institute for Literature and Arts, 2020), 370.
[16] Barát, "The Politics," 370.

final destination for an indefinite time period. University students and young men who had volunteered for military service were the only ones who might have received a temporary exemption.

The imperative to document the relocation program was signified by the establishment of a separate office, the WRA Photographic Section, in Denver, Colorado, in 1943, organized and headed by another documentary photographer, Thomas Parker, who had been a career federal government photographer as of 1935. Hirabayashi described Parker's art as "explicitly institutional style photography … used by agencies such as the WRA … to garner public support for large-scale governmental policies and projects."[17] However, by the time the office started its operation, Lange's appointment had been terminated.

4.1. Evacuation and assembly

Since Lange was hired so early on and lived in the San Francisco Bay area at the time, she was able to document the evacuation and relocation process from the very beginning. Her first images recorded key moments during the last days of the internees before their scheduled departure, including family portraits in front of their homes and scenes of them shuttering their businesses, arranging finances with their bankers, or giving away their belongings as well as children spending their last days at school – many of which she was able to record because of her local social capital.

The portrait of the Shibuya family[18] surprises the viewer as it depicts a family with six children on the front lawn of their spacious, all-American family home built in the classic Adamesque style. The beautiful house and carefully tended garden with a newly planted young tree on the right conveys a feeling of comfort, contentment, and well-being, and a focus on a promising, successful future toward which to build. The look of uncertainty and concern on their faces instead of broad smiles, however, makes one realize the absurdity of the *Executive Order*: the life of this family, of hard-working model American citizens, would change completely merely because of their ethnicity.

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[17] Lane R. Hirabayashi, "Government Photography of the WRA Camps and Resettlement," in *Densho Encyclopedia*, edited by Brian Niiya (2020). https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Government_photography_of_the_WRA_Camps_and_Resettlement/.

[18] "Members of the Shibuya family are pictured at their home before evacuation. The father and the mother were born in Japan and came to this country in 1904. At that time the father had $60 in cash and a basket of clothes. He later built a prosperous business of raising select varieties of chrysanthemums, which he shipped to eastern markets under his own trade name. Six children in the family were born in the United States. The four older children attended leading California universities. Evacuees of Japanese ancestry will be housed in War Relocation Authority centers for the duration." https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft938nb5g8/?order=2&brand=oac4.

Similarly, in another image taken during lunch hour at Raphael Weill Public School,[19] we see a little blonde American boy who is to lose his Japanese American friend for good in a few days, a friend who will no longer receive the education each child both deserves and is entitled and obliged to receive by law, as his life will be disrupted by an unjustified turn. The blonde boy hanging on lovingly to his friend is a twist which not only transforms the image into the future plight of the white, which the American audience always responds to with heightened compassion, but also forces us to recognize that racism is a social construct that derives from and poisons the adult world. Lange's other images of children taking the pledge of allegiance in the yard of the same school[20] demonstrate to us in no uncertain terms that these children are full American citizens, socialized to express loyalty to the American flag and the nation it represents – and Lange's camera angle portrays them as her equals in this endeavor.

Pictures she took in the streets of major cities in California bear witness to the chaos that the *Executive Order* had created. Many tried to save the fruits of their labor, which was almost impossible to do as they were given days to dispose of their homes and businesses. One of her images demonstrates how properly dressed and presentable Dave Tatsuno and his father are, standing before their shop, even the day before the shuttering of their business,[21] while another image she took attests to the ethnic segregation that followed immediately after the *Executive Order* was made public: the line of demarcation between the Chinese- and Japanese-owned businesses is crystal clear as we recognize a discreet "Chinese store" sign in the shop window of the store on the left, while huge signs advertising a closing sale in the windows of the shop on the right speak to their Japanese ownership. Further images of desolate shop fronts with the signs "I am an American" or "Proud to be an American" capture the desperate response of some shop owners to the evacuation process.

Lange also recorded the chaos of the first days of the evacuation. The confusion and uncertainty of what comes next are reflected in the faces of the internees in some of the images, as their luggage is being dropped off at the curb by the bus

[19] "Lunch hour at the Raphael Weill Public School, Geary and Buchanan Streets, in the so-called international section. Many children of Japanese ancestry were evacuated with their parents from this neighborhood. Educational facilities will be established at War Relocation Authority centers where evacuees will spend the duration."
https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft000002rr/?order=2&brand=oac4.

[20] "Children of the Weill public school, from the so-called international settlement, shown in a flag pledge ceremony. Some of them are evacuees of Japanese ancestry who will be housed in War relocation authority centers for the duration."
https://www.loc.gov/item/2001705926/.

[21] "Dave Tatsuno and his father, merchants of Japanese ancestry in San Francisco prior to evacuation."
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:San_Francisco,_California._Dave_Tatsuno_and_his_father,_merchants_of_Japanese_ancestry_in_San_Frans_._._._-_NARA_-_537769.jpg.

station.[22] Other images depict internees as deprived of their names and identities; they were given identity numbers written on tags secured to their clothes. Not unlike animals being taken to a market or a slaughterhouse, they were checked against a master list and guided to the proper train or bus to be delivered according to a plan designed by the authorities. Despite all this, the internees maintained their dignity and propriety, as seen in the face and posture of an elderly man, a grandfather,[23] depicted amid the turmoil, sitting on a folding chair with a straight back, waiting contently for his transport. Similarly, the portrait of seven-year-old Mae Yanagi conveys how senseless the *Executive Order* was through an elemental contrast between her Sunday best – a white shirt, fashionable checked coat, and pretty, elegant matching hat – and the dehumanizing white tag secured to the collar of her coat.

Most evacuees were shipped off to temporary assembly centers, such as the one in San Bruno, California. These centers were usually not designed for human habitation and thus had insufficient space and sanitary conditions. Originally constructed as cow sheds, livestock pavilions, or horse stables on racetracks, they were now quickly emptied and whitewashed to serve as temporary homes for the evacuees. Lange's images at Tanforan Assembly Center in San Bruno document the stark realities in this transitional phase: the long barracks with tiny rooms packed with families, with logs randomly placed on the muddy ground along them to provide some kind of a walkway for internees to move around.[24] We see the puzzled faces of the elderly in despair, sitting on cast iron beds in an unfurnished closed space with bare wooden walls, younger internees carrying buckets to fetch water, or people standing in long lines waiting patiently to enter the hall for a meal.

[22] "With baggage stacked, residents of Japanese ancestry await bus at Wartime Civil Control Administration station, 2020 Van Ness Avenue, as part of the first group of 664 to be evacuated from San Francisco on April 6, 1942. Evacuees will be housed in War Relocation Authority centers for the duration."
https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/await-bus-with-baggage.

[23] "A grandfather awaits evacuation bus. Evacuees of Japanese ancestry will be housed in War Relocation Authority centers for the duration."
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Centerville,_California._A_grandfather_awaits_evacuation_bus._Evacuees_of_Japanese_ancestry_will_b_._._._-_NARA_-_537566.jpg/.

[24] "Tanforan Assembly center, San Bruno, California. Barracks for family living quarters. Each door enters into a family unit of two small rooms. Tanforan assembly center was opened two days before the photograph was made. On the first day there had been a heavy rain. When a family has arrived here, first step of evacuation is complete." https://catalog.archives.gov/id/537670.

4.2. Life in the relocation camps

While Lange visited various relocation centers, the most well-known internment camp she photographed was in Manzanar, California.[25] It was home to the very first of the ten relocation centers established for Japanese American internees. Situated on 814 acres along the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada and surrounded by an additional 5,700 acres of fenced, guarded land, it contained 36 blocks, each made up of 14 residential barracks, each of which was divided into 20-by-25-foot spaces that served as home to individual families (some with up to eleven members). In total, the camp housed around 10,000 evacuees, 88 percent of whom came from Los Angeles County, and 72 percent from the city of Los Angeles.[26]

Lange visited Manzanar at various times and documented the early phase of camp life. By then she was quite restricted in her work: Robinson noted that "military police sometimes accompanied [photographers] as they worked, steering them away from subjects deemed objectionable by the authorities,"[27] but Lange was even discouraged from talking to her subjects – which was a method she had developed early on as a photographer – and was refused access to certain places, even if she had originally been given clearance to enter. No soldiers, barbed-wire fences, or watchtowers were to appear in the pictures, nor anything that contradicted the image of a peaceful flow of life in the camp, such as searches, protests, cases of suicide, or deadly accidents. Another reason why Lange's images do not tend to display suffering through the portrayal of the body may be that the expression of pain is culturally shaped – and in the US, individual suffering has been "viewed as a very personal experience, undesirable, socially insignificant, and economically dangerous, and thus its public expression is regarded as inappropriate."[28]

While WRA policy was clear on what not to photograph, it specifically encouraged the depiction of certain activities that supported their propaganda. Burton[29] noted that taking pictures of people engaged in landscaping and gardening, for example, was greatly approved of by the WRA as Japanese ornamental gardens were believed to help promote a favorable perception of the camps. Similarly, internees volunteering to make camouflage nets and growing guayule for rubber tires was presented as proof of their patriotism successfully upheld by the camp and of their

[25] "Dust storm at this War Relocation Authority center where evacuees of Japanese ancestry are spending the duration." https://catalog.archives.gov/id/539961.
[26] Lon Kurashige, "Resistance, Collaboration, and Manzanar Protest," *Pacific Historical Review* 70, no. 3 (August 2001): 390.
[27] Robinson, *Elusive*, 20.
[28] Irén Annus, "Seeing Pain: The Representation of Pain in American Painting," in *Feeling in Others: Essays on Empathy and Suffering in Modern American Culture*, edited by Nieves Pascual and Ballesteros Gonzales (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2008), 111.
[29] Jeffery F. Burton and Mary M. Farrell, *World War II Japanese American Internment Sites in Hawaii* (Honolulu: Japanese Cultural Center, 2007).

continued support for US war efforts. Lange captured these themes in some of her pictures, but by presenting them through a series of contrasts, she was able to highlight the abnormality of life in these camps. She photographed some of the most striking examples of Japanese landscape art, such as the one made by former landscape artist William Katsuki, as desolate, with no one enjoying the beauty and harmony it radiated, which is in further contrast to the tar paper-cloaked barracks behind it.[30] In some other images she depicts how a number of people admire a beautiful garden with an artificially installed water feature as the focal point, but the barracks around it and the lack of space and perspective which are otherwise essential elements of Japanese garden designs creates a sense of tension and unease. One is forced to realize how the stunning elements of the garden are crowded together in the design, just as the internees were crowded together in the camps, and this amplifies the dissonance between the preconception the WRA may have had of the impact of landscaping images and the reality that they conveyed of daily life in the internment camps.

Lange was tireless in creating images that allowed viewers to gain a fuller glimpse into life behind the wires, such as children playing baseball, that quintessentially American team sport – and the most popular game to play and watch in the camps. Other images capture the internees getting to work and trying to create a livable and meaningful environment, despite their circumstances: waiting in long lines, finding refuge from the swelteringly hot summer sun in the shade of a black barracks wall covered by tar paper, with some of the internees making use of the time otherwise pointlessly wasted to read;[31] farmers clearing land and laboring in the fields, trying to turn uncultivated territories into fertile fields to grow vegetables; well-educated professional evacuees offering their services to others in need, such as in a temporary emergency hospital that the internees had established, although it lacked proper medical equipment in many ways; or organizing an orphanage and a voluntary school that children attended assiduously, despite the stark circumstances.[32]

5. Conclusion

Lange's art of the internment is based on a sophisticated balancing act she achieved in each image between the neat, orderly, impeccable internees and the bare, often dehumanizing conditions under which they were forced to live by their own government – only because of their ethnicity. The portrayal of the internees as decent, self-sufficient, conscientious, and considerate people using their education,

[30] "William Katsuki, former professional landscape gardener for large estates in Southern California, demonstrates his skill and ingenuity in creating."
https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/k6z60t5b/?order=2&brand=oac4.
[31] "Part of a line waiting for lunch outside the mess hall at noon."
https://catalog.archives.gov/id/537968.
[32] "Young sixth-grade students studying their lessons in the shade of the barracks at this first voluntary elementary school." https://ddr.densho.org/ddr-densho-151-362/.

creativity, diligence, and patience to construct a livable world in the camps reminds the viewers of the injustice of the incarceration and juxtaposes the dignity with which they accepted their position with the indignity that the internment brought upon them. This is particularly noticeable if we consider her images in the time sequence in which they were created: the trajectory of the forced transformation of the life chances and circumstances of these Japanese Americans within a few months' time from normalcy to tragedy documents a shocking official procession that obliges the viewer to step back, ask questions, and reconsider the policy and its execution. In addition, change is principally appalling when comparing before and after images thematically, such as children's education, the families' lifestyle, and the comfort level of the place the internees call their home.

The constant underlying tension the viewer may sense through the process of interpretation is amplified by Lange's masterful portrayal of the psychological condition of the people she photographed, which was something she developed as a popular portraitist of the San Francisco elite early on in her career. This is how she was able to bring art and sophistication into her images that "happen to be superbly made pieces of evidence, documents of such a high order that they convey the feelings of the victims as well as the facts of the crime."[33]

Lange was laid off after four months, at the end of July 1942, which the agency justified by stating that her work had been completed. She was surprised and wrote to Adams: "I went through an experience I'll never forget when I was working on it and learned a lot, even if I accomplished nothing."[34]Afterwards, many of her images were considered inappropriate for public consumption by the WRA and were impounded for years to come. "Shortly before her death, she stated that she had been required to sign, under oath and before a notary, that she would not discuss or disclose her work."[35] It was seven years after her death in 1965 that 27 of her images were selected to be part of an exhibition on *Executive Order 9066* in New York's Whitney Museum. Currently, all her images are available electronically on the National Archives website.[36] They all do justice to the execution of the *Executive Order* and stand silent witness to the realities of the relocation program, encouraging viewers to seriously (re)consider governmental policies, both in the past and in the future. In the end, Lange has accomplished a lot.

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[33] A. D. Coleman, "A Dark Day in History," *New York Times*, September 24, 1972. https://www.nytimes.com/1972/09/24/archives/a-dark-day-in-history.html.

[34] quoted in Ichikawa, "How the Photography."

[35] Gina L. Wenger, "Documentary Photography: Three Photographers' Standpoints on the Japanese American Internment," *Art Education* 60, no. 5 (September 2007): 36.

[36] Lange, Dorothea. *Photographs*. Washington, DC: National Archives. https://catalog.archives.gov/search?page=1&q=Dorothea%20Lange.

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