Discovering Dorothea Lange’s Photographs of the Internment of Japanese Americans

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This curriculum was created to encourage the study of Dorothea Lange’s photographs in connection with the PBS American Masters documentary and companion book *Dorothea Lange: Grab a Hunk of Lightning*. Excerpts of this curriculum have been posted by PBS. Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams’s internment images are accessible from the Library of Congress website and a corresponding image set is posted on The Museum of Contemporary Photography Columbia College Chicago’s (MoCP) website. The MoCP has select holdings of Lange’s original internment images that can be viewed by appointment. Ansel Adams’s internment images are not held in the MoCP collection. They are included here for comparison and to provide additional context on the images made by photographers documenting the internment for the US Office of War Information.

**Lesson Goal/Overview:** With a focus on the photographs of Dorothea Lange, students will develop literacy and critical thinking skills as they consider and compare a range of images related to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Students will also read supporting informational texts to learn about and consider the cultural and historic contexts of Lange’s photographs of the internment.

Dorothea Lange
*Hayward, Calif.--Members of the Mochida family awaiting evacuation bus.*
1942
Note to teachers: The close reading of Dorothea Lange’s photographs of the Japanese internment is the focus of this unit. This curriculum likely contains more additional activities than you could complete in your class. Select the additional activities that best fit your needs and interests.

Curriculum Connections: Language arts/literacy; social science and art. National Content Standards are listed at the end of this document.

Grade Level: This unit was developed for use by junior high school and high aged students but could be adapted for use by younger and college-age students.

Essential questions:
- How can a close reading of Lange’s photographs deepen our understanding of the Japanese American internment?
- How can we identify the point of view of an author or artist?
- What was the goal of the United States government in having Lange photograph the internment?
- What role did photography play in the history of the internment of Japanese Americans?

Enduring understandings
- Like words, photographs can tell stories, record history, and express opinions.
- Reading across a range of types of texts can help us better understand an era of history. Studying the past helps us better understand the present world and the future.

Dorothea Lange
Grandfather and Grandson
• Small details are important in understanding both the text and the point of view of the author/photographer.
• The point of view of an author or photographer can impact our understanding of historic events.
• Reading primary source materials can help us understand the cultural and historic times in which Lange created her images and how government actions were reconsidered at a later date.

Discovering Dorothea Lange's Photographs of the Internment of Japanese Americans

Note to Teachers
To introduce this unit have students read and discuss the below text. For a longer, more complex understanding of Lange views on the internment and her difficulties making the photographs, read Partridge, Elizabeth in Restless Spirit: The Life and Work of Dorothea Lange, (pp. 81-89). New York: Viking Children's Books (gr. 5-8).

Introduction
In 1936, photographer Dorothea Lange produced the iconic twentieth century image: Migrant Mother. She was working for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a program set up by Roosevelt to publicize the plight of those devastated by the Great Depression. Lange was completely in agreement with the goals of the FSA, and repeatedly went out photographing on the road for weeks at a time. She took pictures of migrants stooped over crops, their cardboard shacks and broken down cars, the billowing dust and unrelenting rain. Conditions were difficult, the work exhausting, the hardships faced by the
migrants and dust bowl refugees heartbreaking. She photographed with one goal in mind: to show the perseverance and dignity of people in the most difficult situations.

After photographing for the FSA, Lange was hired by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) to photograph the internment of the Japanese and Japanese Americans on the Pacific coast, following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Presumably, the government wanted to show how orderly the process was, how well the internees were being treated. This time she was deeply in opposition to the government’s actions, but felt it was critically important to document the internment.

More than 110,000 people were removed from their homes in the evacuation during the winter of 1942. Nearly half were children and young adults. Everyone who’d been born in the United States was a citizen. Unlike European immigrants of that time, Japanese immigrants and many others considered "non-white" were not allowed to apply for US citizenship. Nearly two thirds of those incarcerated were Japanese Americans, and one third were Japanese born.

Signs were posted on telephone poles and buildings instructing "all persons of Japanese ancestry" to report to assembly centers. Lange began by photographing Japanese and Japanese Americans in their homes and shops, preparing for the evacuation. They hurriedly sold their belongings and property for pennies on the dollar. Fearing increased persecution, many Japanese destroyed family keepsakes and photographs that showed cultural connections to Japan. Lange documented the internees as they were labeled with numbered tags before being sent to a temporary assembly center at Tanforan Race Track. The stalls had been hastily cleaned out days before their arrival, but still reeked of horse manure. Later Lange drove down to the Manzanar Relocation Center to take pictures as the internees settled in to the tar paper-covered barracks where they would live for the next three or four years.
Lange worked with a sense of urgency, up at dawn, photographing until the light was gone. There were a number of subjects that were off-limits to her camera: no photographing the barb wire fences, the guard towers with their search lights and guns, no images of the bathrooms, with six pairs of toilets installed back to back with no partitions for privacy.

“The difficulties of doing it were immense,” Lange said. But it wasn’t just the physical hardships she was referring to. She felt forcing the Japanese and Japanese Americans into relocation centers was an unprecedented suspension of civil liberties. For Lange it was “an example of what happens to us if we lose our heads. What was horrifying was to do this completely on the basis of what blood may be coursing through a person’s veins, nothing else. Nothing to do with your affiliations or friendships or associations. Just blood.”

I. Close Reading: Dorothea Lange’s Photographs Documenting the Japanese Internment

Note to Teachers
When engaging students in “close readings” of photographs have them start with simple observations of what they see in the image before they make judgments or express opinions about the work. Scaffold up to more complex questions and understandings and ask students to root their observations in evidence in the image or supporting texts.

Questions for Looking and Discussion
1. Look carefully at each photograph in the Lange image set that accompanies this unit. Describe what you see.
2. What pulls your attention? What do you think Lange wanted us to notice? Why?
3. What can you tell about how Lange made this picture?
4. What do you notice about the people in the picture?
5. What do you see the people doing?
   o Why do you think Lange chose to photograph these particular people and at this particular moment?
6. What is the mood of the picture? How is that communicated?
7. Lange often added captions to her images that gave you more information, as well as giving you her point of view. What do you learn from the captions of these images? How does that change or add to what we learn in the photographs?
8. What do we NOT see in this work? Why do you think that is? When you consider these pictures as a group, what story do they tell about the internment?
9. Lange was forbidden to photograph the barbed wire fence, the guard towers, and the bathrooms.
   o Why do you think the government didn’t want to make documents of these aspects of the Manzanar War Relocation Center?
Pair Lange Images and Quotes

When speaking later about the internment, Lange said:

- “I photographed the billboards that were up at the time. Savage, savage, billboards.”
- “This is what we did. How did it happen? How could we?”
- “On the surface it looked like a narrow job. It had a sharp beginning and a sharp end. Everything about it was highly concentrated. Actually, it wasn’t narrow at all. The deeper I got into it, the bigger it became.”

Pair these quotes with a photograph that you believe matches Lange’s feelings. How do these quotes change what you know about Lange’s images, as well as the internment? Discuss your reasons for the choices you made.

II. Close Reading: Ansel Adams’ Photographs of Manzanar

In 1943, Ansel Adams was asked to photograph the Manzanar War Relocation Center, the same place Lange photographed two years earlier. Using the image set that accompanies this unit, conduct a “close read” of select images by Ansel Adams documenting the internment of Japanese Americans using the “questions for looking and discussion” above. Then consider the questions below.

- What do the Japanese Internment images by Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams have in common? How do they differ?
What might comparing the internment images of these two photographers teach us about the “truthfulness” of documentary photographs? What might be “truthful” in Lange’s and Adams’ photographs? How might their images be misleading?

Lange’s photographs were impounded by the government during the war and were not seen for many years. Why do you think the government decided they should not be seen?

Why do you think the government approved of Ansel Adan’s internment images?

III. Close Reading of Primary Sources

Lange’s images are primary sources. There are also important historical documents which are primary sources about the internment. Do a “close read” of the documents below to consider the internment from the government’s point of view as well as the point of view of several of the internees. As you read make notes on the words and passages that stand out to you. When you have finished, pair up with a classmate and share what you noted. Then share what you discussed with the class.

A. U.S. Government Documents

1. Exclusion Order for San Jose Japanese Internment, 1942

   What stands out to you in this document? Why?

   Why do you think the U.S. government would communicate by putting signs on telephone poles?

2. The Civil Rights Act of 1988

   What stands out to you in this document?

   What reasons are given in this document for the government issuing a formal apology?

   All survivors were given $20,000 "redress" money, and a letter of apology from the president. http://www.facingfreedom.org/race-and-citizenship/japanese-internment/collection

   Do you think this was an adequate compensation for their loss of freedom, property, and businesses? Why or why not?

B. The Perspectives of Internees

The Japanese who were interned were forbidden from having cameras or photographing until the spring of 1943. Few photographs of life in the camps were made by internees and many of the milestones that families photograph, such as the birth of babies and family celebrations went unrecorded. Some internees wrote letters or kept journals that expressed how they felt. Others created artwork to record and express what they experienced.
• Use the close reading techniques you have used thus far in this unit consider primary documents created by detainees.

1. Joyce Nakamura Okazaki Interview
Joyce Nakamura Okazaki was seven when she and her family were interned. She was photographed by Ansel Adams in 1943. When his book, Born Free and Equal, was reprinted in 2001, her portrait was chosen for the cover. In a 2014 interview with the Huffington Post, she talked about her experiences as a child in Manzanar.

• Look carefully at Adams’ portrait of Okazaki. What are your impressions of this girl based on this image?
• What do you think she would say if she could talk to us?
• Now read the quote below from Okazaki. What is interesting or surprising to you about this quote? Are these words that you would expect to come from the girl in the picture? Why or why not?
“The interesting thing about school, one of the first things we learned was to be very aware of the barbed wire fencing. We couldn't go near the barbed wire fence because we were told we would be shot if we even went close to it. There were guard towers all around and they were all manned by sentries. We were also told to be on the lookout for snakes and scorpions. I had no idea what a scorpion looked like. We learned what they looked like by having an art lesson -- we drew a rattlesnake and then a scorpion, and that's how we figured out what they looked like.”

2. Bill Manbo’s Photographs
In 1943 an internee named Bill Manbo began photographing his young family and events at the Heart Mountain Relocation Center in Wyoming. His vivid color photographs offer a rare look at camp life from the perspective of an internee. They are published in the book *Colors of Confinement: Rare Kodachrome Photographs of Japanese American Incarceration in World War II* (2014 Eric L Muller).

3. Additional Accounts by Internees
Artworks, letters, and oral histories can be found here: http://www.calisphere.universityofcalifornia.edu/jarda/browse/personal-experiences.html

Dorothea Lange
Manzanar, Calif.--An elementary school with voluntary attendance has been established with volunteer evacuee teachers, most of whom are college graduates.

IV. Lost Time, Lost Freedom

A. The internees spent an average of three years in the relocation centers. How old would you be when you got out, if you were interned now?
   - What do you think would have changed?
• What (events) might you miss?
• What might you need to catch up on?

B. Research America during the years of the internment, 1942-1946.
• During the war, what music, dances and movies were popular?
• What else was happening in our country at that time?
• What sports teams were winning? What movies were box office hits?
• What would the internees have missed?

C. Research and Report on YOUR Community 1942-1946
• What photographs and newspaper articles can you find from that era?
• What other sources might you look into?
• Who might you talk to in your community to learn more?
• What questions would you ask? Do they have any personal photographs taken during the war?
• What did you learn?

V. Close Reading: Historical Fiction
Read historical fiction about the experience of Japanese internees such as Baseball Saved Us. (Ken Mochizuki, (author), Dom Lee (illustrator), Reprint 1995).

• Though the author may have made up characters, they are living in a real historical time. What can the author contribute to a historical period by telling history through the point of view of a character who did not exist?
• How does the author use the senses, thoughts, and feelings of the character, as well as telling a good story to enhance a historical time?
• What freedom does an author of fiction have that a photographer or nonfiction writer doesn’t have?
• In what ways can historical fiction be “truthful?”
• In what ways can historical fiction be misleading, incorrect, or even false? What can historical fiction do or evoke differently/better than the historic photographs?

VI. Words Matter: How Language Impacts Perception
Word choice can frame or manipulate how we view or remember an event. The first director of the War Relocation Authority, Milton Eisenhower, wrote in his 1974 memoir: "We called the relocation centers 'evacuation centers.' Never did we refer to them as "concentration camps."

Think, read about, discuss and debate the definitions and usage of some of the words used for the internment and consider alternatives.
What types of events are "evacuation" and "relocation" usually used for?
What are you usually referring to when you use the word "camp?"

The Japanese American Citizens League has a document titled Map of Concentration Camps. They and others have suggested the following words are more accurate:
- Incarceration
- Inmates
- Concentration camps

What is the difference between being "interned" and "incarcerated?" Do you think the Japanese and Japanese Americans were technically interned or incarcerated? Why?

What other places are described as "concentration camps?" Does this influence how you feel about using the term "concentration camp" for the Japanese American camps?

Why do you think the American Government selected and used the words that they did? Can you think of other examples in American political life where official word choice might impact public perception?

For another perspective on word choices, see Roger Daniel's article, "Words Do matter: A Note on Inappropriate Terminology and the Incarceration of the Japanese Americans."¹

VII. Activity: Picturing Home

“A camera is a tool for learning how to see without a camera.”

-Dorothea Lange

If you had to leave your home and most of your belongings as the Japanese Americans who were interned during WWII did, what would you miss most? What would you want to remember? Photographing is a way of showing what we notice, care about, and want to preserve and show others. Once a photographer identifies a subject, she then thinks through how to make the best picture of that person, place or thing.

¹ http://www.nps.gov/tule/forteachers/upload/RDaniels_euphemisms.pdf
When Dorothea Lange took a picture she would look through the viewfinder of her camera and move in or out to include important details and leave out unnecessary information that might distract from the visual story she wanted to tell. She would notice and use the light in the scene. Early morning and late afternoon light was always the best. When she found something that interested her, she would patiently wait for the right instant to click the camera’s shutter. Lange often photographed at a distance, and then moved in closer as people became more comfortable with her presence. She often would take more than one picture of her subject. Once the pictures were developed, she would select the best ones. Often she liked what she had in the frame, but realized if she “cropped” the picture, it would be a stronger image.

- When you think of “home” what images come to mind? What objects and scenes evoke home for you? What belongings are important to your family? Why? Write about this in your journal and discuss as a class.
- If you were to create photographs to preserve images of that place or teach others about you and your family, what would you photograph?
- Look around a place that is meaningful to you and seek out those things.

Look through the camera’s viewfinder or at the display on your camera and play with composing images. Try moving the camera up and down, and see how the appearance of your subject changes. Try moving in closer, or standing further back. Which details are important to include?

- Take a photograph of the strongest compositions. Look through the pictures you’ve made and select the best ones. If time allows photograph more than one place or thing and edit the photos into a sequence.
- Share and discuss your images with your classmates. Which do you think are the best images? Why do they evoke “home” for you? Are there any you would like to reshoot or any important scenes or objects that you missed?

If you don’t have access to a camera, look through a rectangle cut in a piece of cardboard to practice framing an image. Drawn or write about what you would show in a photograph and how you would make that image.

**VIII. Final Reflection and Synthesis**

- In discussion and or writing describe and discuss each of the texts you explored in this unit including the photographs of Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams, primary sources including Exclusion Order for San Jose Japanese Internment, 1942 and informational texts such as text from Restless Spirit.
- What are the characteristics of each type of text? What does each do well? What are the limitations of each type of text? What did you learn about the experience of internees from each source? How?
- Which text did you find most interesting? Why?
• What did you learn about how the point of view of an author can impact our understanding of historic events?
• How do these texts function together to help us learn about the experience of Japanese Americans who were interned during WWII?
• What questions do you still have about this era of American history?
• The internment was more than sixty years ago. Why is it important to learn about it today?

Can you think of other examples of discrimination and civil rights violations in American history? What connections can you find between those events and the discrimination the Japanese experienced in America during WWII? Can you think of examples of discrimination happening today?

**Suggested Resources**

**Online Resources:**

* PBS resources: http://www.pbs.org/thewar/at_home_civil_rights_japanese_american.htm

* Library of Congress Teachers Guide:  

* National Museum of American History resources: http://amhistory.si.edu/ourstory/about/  
http://amhistory.si.edu/ourstory/pdf/internment/internment_readbaseball.pdf

* Smithsonian resources: Japanese Americans and the U.S. constitution:  
http://amhistory.si.edu/perfectunion/experience/index.html

* Ansel Adams Manzanar Photographs:  

* Joyce Nakamura Okasaki interview:  
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/12/joyce-nakamura-okazaki-manzanar_n_5289723.html

**Informational Texts**
Maissie and Richard Conrat, Executive Order 9066: The Internment of 110,000 Japanese Americans, 1992

Maissie and Richard Conrat, Executive Order 9066: The Internment of 110,000 Japanese Americans, 1992


Lawson Fusao Inada, Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience, 2000


Elizabeth Partridge, *Dorothea Lange: Grab a Hunk of Lightning*, 2013


**Historical Fiction**


Marissa Moss (author), Yuko Shimizu (illustrator), *Barbed Wire Baseball*. 2013, Grades 1-5.


Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston, *Farewell To Manzanar, Reprint 2012*. Grades 7 up.

**National Content Area Standards**

CCSS (www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy)

*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.7*: Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7*: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

*CC.K-12.R.R.6 Craft and Structure: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

*CC.K-12.R.R.9 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

*K-12 R R.2 CC.K-12.R.R.2 Key Ideas and Details: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.3* Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

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*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.