

Lesson Title: Witness to Oppression

Lesson Author: Becky Villagrán

Grade Level(s): 9-12

Overview

In this lesson, students will learn about how photographer Dorothea Lange used her privilege and access to incarcerated Japanese Americans to document human rights abuses. Students will engage in a role-playing activity that explores targeting and discrimination. Students will then reflect on this experience and connect it to the present. What are we currently doing in reaction to the detention camps at the southwest border?

Essential Question(s)

- How do you respond when you witness oppression?
- How is evidence created of abuses of power and how does it inform a historical narrative?
- How do white artists use their privilege to expose societal wrongs?

Student Objectives

Students will be able to...

- Explain the significance of Dorothea Lange's photography in our knowledge of the experience of the Japanese American Incarceration.
- Reflect on their own actions when faced with or witnesses to oppression and discrimination.
- Connect Dorothea Lange's photography and witnessing of World War II-era camps to today's child detention centers.

Materials

Teachers will provide the following materials:

- Taylor, Alan. "Photos: A Tent City for Detained Children in Texas." *The Atlantic*, June 19, 2018.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2018/06/photos-a-tent-city-for-detained-children-in-texas/563147/>
- Chambers, Tim. "Dorothea Lange's Censored Photos of FDR's Japanese Incarceration Camps." *Anchor Editions*, December 7, 2017.
<https://anchoreditions.com/blog/dorothea-lange-censored-photographs>
- Clip from the film, *And Then They Came for Us*:
 - Dorothea Lange (8:20 - 12:27)
 - After registering for a free account, educators can screen the film on Facing History's website:
<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/video/and-then-they-came-us>

Assessment

Students will have a variety of ways to show their learning. Options include: draw a picture or write a short poem/freewrite reflection that will be turned in to demonstrate their learning and new understanding about the topic(s).

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C3 Alignment

This lesson supports the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework:

- D2.His.2.9-12. Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.
- D4.7.9-12. Assess options for individual and collective action to address local, regional, and global problems by engaging in self-reflection, strategy identification, and complex causal reasoning.

Prior to Class

- Students should have prior knowledge of the historical thinking concepts of *evidence*, *change*, and *continuity*.
- Students should also have learned about the concept of citizenship and the fight of people of color to gain access to citizenship in U.S. History.
- Some background on the attacks on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent issuance of Executive Order 9066.
- Students should also have some knowledge of child separations, ongoing detainment, and criminalization of people applying for refugee status at the U.S. Southwest Border.

Do Now

At the beginning of class, pass out two candies to each student. Instruct students not to touch them yet, but leave them on the top of their desk. This activity works well with candies such as Starburst or Hershey kisses, which offer different colors or choices. Ahead of time, ensure there are only five of one "color" of candy.

You then will read this script:

"Today we will be learning more about the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. We will be engaging in an activity that is not meant to replicate what happened to Japanese Americans. Nothing could really do that. This is a metaphor and by no means is meant to disrespect or dishonor what people have and continue to go through.

But something has happened. All of those who have received a "red" candy will have to immediately leave their desk and relocate to the center of the room and sit on the floor. You can not take your things with you. If you trust your neighbors you can ask them to watch over your things, but you can't be sure they won't take them as their own. You may not take your phones with you to your new location. Photography and phone calls are not permitted in your new destination.

Please proceed to the center of the room. The rest of the lesson will go on from here."

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Part 1: Role-Playing Activity

Students may grumble and laugh a bit. As those with the candy that mandates them to relocate to the center, they might ask a friend to watch their candy. Some students might immediately take a neighbor's candy to "watch over." This can be encouraged by you.

(Note: these types of activities can be difficult for some students. You might want to pre-plan who gets the "chosen" candy color so students who will not be triggered by this singling out. A supportive and healthy classroom culture is a prerequisite for an activity such as this one.)

Now, the students will look at photography from World War II-era Japanese American Incarceration. You can either project these images or pass out copies.

Prompt students to look at the following photos by Dorothea Lange and write down some reflections. You can choose some or all from this website:

<https://anchoreditions.com/blog/dorothea-lange-censored-photographs>

1. What do you find *Significant*?
2. What do you find *Interesting*?
3. What do you find *Troubling*?

After the students have written their thoughts, they can pair-share with someone near them. Students with the "red" candy, who are sitting in the center of class on the floor, should be given paper and pencil if they didn't bring any with them.

After about five minutes of discussion, have a whole group discussion gathering ideas about what were the most significant, interesting, and troubling issues. You might also ask if students have any further questions about the photographs.

Some of the ideas and themes they might bring up:

- Dehumanization
- Single file lines and fences
- Could not pack much
- Uncertainty
- Families traveling together

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Part 2: Film Clip Viewing

Now the students will watch the clip from *And Then They Came for Us* on Dorthea Lange (8:20 - 12:27). They should jot down notes in a similar manner. What was *Significant*? What was *Interesting*? What was *Troubling*?

After the clip, students should discuss the following questions:

1. What types of evidence do we have to understand Japanese American Incarceration?
2. What does this clip reveal about evidence in the understanding of history? How do photographs differ from other types of evidence?
3. How did Dorthea Lange respond to the oppression of others? How did she use her privilege?

Ask students to pair-share and then move to a whole class discussion.

Part 3: Conclusion of Candy Activity

The teacher should now read this script:

"The situation has resolved itself. I now invite our students on the floor to go back to their desks. If your candies are still there, you can eat them. If you asked someone to watch over your candy, you can ask for it back; however, they may not still have the candies or want to give them back. You may go now."

Debrief:

Ask the students to share their reflections about the activity. This should be pretty open-ended. They will likely share that it did not seem fair, but that it did in some ways show that their property was likely lost, and people could not always be trusted to watch their belongings. They might reveal that this activity did not at all show what it was like (which is true).

NOTE: When Japanese Americans were finally allowed to leave the prison camps, many found that their property had been seized. As reported on the Densho blog, losses of property amounted to between \$1-3 billion (not adjusted for inflation) but there is no exact way to determine the total economic losses.

Now, ask the students and ask them to reflect on their own role-playing:

- Why did no one complain or speak out against this treatment?
- Where were the resisters?
- The allies?

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Part 4: Change and Continuity: American Concentration Camps

If kids did speak out against your instructions during the role-playing activity, you can talk about that. But, in all likelihood, students will have gone along with this activity because they trust you as a teacher and know it is just an activity.

But this can be an opportunity to ask them about what can be done when something discriminatory is happening. Dorothea Lange did not have the power to stop the incarceration but she did take advantage of her job working for the government to show the inhumanity of what was happening. And our understanding of this history would not be as full without these primary sources that evoke so much humanity and empathy.

Now, the students will be asked to look through an online source of photographs from the Tornillo Detention Center in Texas from June of 2018 (see the link to *The Atlantic* article in the Materials section).

At its height, the Tent City concentration camp at Tornillo held 2,700 children. The Detention Camp for Child Migrants was shut down for human rights abuses, but is being refurbished to be reopened for 2,500 adult male migrants. These detainees have not been tried for any crime and are being held indefinitely.

Students should be given laptops or print outs of the photos. Instruct students to look at all of the photos and then answer prompts similar to the ones used during their examination of the World War II-era photos:

1. What do you find *Significant*?
2. What do you find *Interesting*?
3. What do you find *Troubling*?

After debriefing these questions, students should chart changes or differences between the pictures by Dorothea Lange during the era of Japanese American Incarceration and the photos by the press in 2018. Then, they should chart the similarities or continuities. Have students draw this simple chart to answer questions:

Changes	Continuity

Students should then pair-share and then have a whole group discussion.

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Students might make the point that the government is not hiring a Dorothea Lange-type for the purpose of showing the “humanity” of the camps. All of the photos of Tornillo are aerial photos by the free press and a government issued photos of bunk beds. It might be worth considering with students: What does this change reveal about the government of the 1940s and now?

Part 5: Assessment

After this lesson is complete, students should then turn in either a picture, poem, or freewrite that shows what they have learned or experienced throughout this lesson.

They might consider these questions to jump-start their thinking:

- What should we do now knowing that similar situations to the Japanese American Incarceration are happening today?
- How can we use our privilege and perspectives to help?

Extension

Students could do a project on other activist photographers or a civic engagement project that addresses a way to stop ICE raids or child separation and incarceration at the border.