

Making Sense of Resilient Life at the International Center of Photography Museum in New York City

Francois Debrix

ASPECT and Political Science, Virginia Tech, francdeb@vt.edu

Abstract: This critical essay reviews two recent simultaneous exhibits at the International Center of Photography Museum in New York City in order to place the concept of resilience in the contemporary context of human insecurity and violence. It shows how the notion of resilient life is uncritically espoused by some contemporary artists and photographers in a way that renders the concept of resilience commonplace, expected, and unproblematic and, as such, incapable of offering a necessary challenge to various forms of violence against bodies and lives today.

Recently, the International Center of Photography Museum in Manhattan, NY featured a couple of exhibitions that, although not directly connected to each other, tackled head on the themes of human insecurity, terror, and US government abuses and other human rights violations in the face of perceived national threats.¹

One exhibit, “Then They Came for Me: Incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II,”ⁱⁱ retraced through documentary photography the plight of US citizens and legal residents of Japanese descent during WWII, before and after Executive Order 9066 was signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt (in February 1942, less than three months after the attack on Pearl Harbor) and led to the forceful eviction, deportation to “relocation” camps (many of them in the desert Southwest), and confiscation of personal property (including land, housing, and personal belongings) of over 120,000 individuals of Japanese ancestry in the United States. “Then They Came for Me” sought to recount through photography the chronology of the deportation and incarceration, everyday life in the camps, and a few moments of resistance to this massive incarceration policy, both during the period of internment and immediately afterwards (most of the camps eventually closed in 1945).

The second exhibit, “Edmund Clark: The Day the Music Died,”ⁱⁱⁱ featured several projects by British artist and photographer Edmund Clark undertaken in the context of the US-led Global War on Terror. Among Clark’s main themes were reflections, via various photo montages, on the US government’s responses to perceived threats to national security after 9/11, and the measures such threats (and fears) led to, including the proliferation of detention sites such as Guantanamo’s Camp Delta, the creation of CIA “black sites” throughout the world, and the implementation of “extraordinary renditions” for terror suspects, Muslim people living in the United States and Western Europe, and unlawful combatants from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (many of whom ended up in Guantanamo or in various detention centers in Afghanistan or Iraq).

Whereas the “Then They Came for Me” exhibit was a fairly traditional photo-documentary display, with a collection of shots taken by well known 20th century American photographers such as Ansell Adams and Dorothea Lange (who obtained

authorizations from the government to capture some of the sights in the camps), or Toyo Miyatake (who was relocated and managed to smuggle a camera and film materials) about lives and people in the camps (but also with images of Japanese individuals' property and land before and after the relocation order), "Edmund Clark: The Day the Music Died" is a presentation of about eight of Clark's projects about the US-led war on terror from a detention/rendition standpoint. Unlike the photographic documentary provided by the International Center of Photography (ICP) Museum based on Adams', Lange's, Miyatake's, and others' works about the WWII Japanese internment camps, where bodies, people, and human faces are prominently featured, Clark's projects almost never show any human presence, any bodies, or any faces.^{iv} In both cases, the materiality of the detentions, of the renditions, of the deportations, of the exceptional measures, and at times of the violence and torture seems to take center stage. But, in the "Then They Came for Me" exhibit, the violent materialities of life under conditions of deportation/internment are achieved through what appears to be a necessary juxtaposition of human bodies (or their faces) and objects (or remnants of objects and material possessions). By contrast, in most of Clark's projects, the materiality of detention or rendition is made visible through a glaring absence of human bodies and human lives as Clark's photos, films, and collages almost always feature objects, furniture, structures (including buildings), scriptures (letters, CIA operating manuals), and various effects that seem to belong to nobody or may only evoke a fading memory of human presence. For example, one of Edmund Clark's most famous works shown at the ICP Museum as part of this exhibit is his "Guantanamo: If the Light Goes Out" feature (completed in 2010) in which, as the museum brochure puts it, "three interconnected experiences of home"^v—the spaces where the US military and military interrogators at Guantanamo live, the spaces where the Guantanamo detainees are kept, and the homes and often bedrooms back home of the Guantanamo detainees as they left them prior to being captured and sent to Camp Delta—are shown next to each other, both enmeshed with and counterposed to each other, with no human body in sight.

Despite their divergent approaches—one is chronological, narrative, and documentary whereas the other is disjointed, non-linear, and non-narrative; one is openly about human life and human presence whereas the other puts objects and things primarily on display—both exhibits are meant to provoke critical reflections, via visual representation, on security and insecurity, the power and violence of government policies versus the fragility of human bodies, and the capacity of life to resist and remain (or even restart) in the wake of tragedy. In a way, put together, these exhibits are allegories about the power of (human) life and the importance in the contemporary era of politics and terror of (human) resilience.

In their book *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously*, political theorists Brad Evans and Julian Reid explain that, as a concept, resilience is a modality of (human) life and living that "promotes adaptability so that life may go on living despite the fact that elements of our living systems may be irreparably destroyed."^{vi} The aim of resilience, they continue, is to produce a "shared knowledge that will continually reshape the forms of communities" while it goes on to sustain "core values which are deemed absolutely 'vital' to our ways of living."^{vii} Both in its presentation and in its content, "Then They

Came for Me” appears to be a visual platform for resilient life. In this photographic exhibit, the lives of US Japanese citizens and legal residents during World War II are shown to have an astounding capacity to adapt to new political realities, to be re-started, rekindled, or revived, even when most of the values that were attached to them (community, family, home, land, nation) have been taken away, and eventually to overcome violence and destruction so they may thrive again, albeit in different settings or with the memories of the deportation and detention in them (as part now of the experiences these human lives had to endure). In the end, despite the glaring injustices, new vitalities were formed, life was able to adapt to different material conditions, bodies survived, and a resilient humanity emerged out of all this.

On the face of it, “Edmund Clark: The Day the Music Died” seems to tell a different story. Here, it appears, the concept of resilient life is challenged. First, as previously mentioned, human lives and bodies are (often) nowhere to be found. The materiality of things and objects, the brutal reality and realism of the photographed places where bodies were (still are) tortured and lives were (still are) disappeared are primordially in evidence. Second, some of the written traces that accompany Clark’s images testify to the inability of some lives to persist or survive (to adapt to new “vital” conditions, in other words) in the face of the power and violence of governments’ security and terror policies and practices. The capacity of human lives and bodies, when faced with adversity, to “become more responsive to a fate which is [ever] worse” (as Evans and Reid put it)^{viii} seems to have been taken away in many of Clark’s projects. Resilient life, perhaps, may have met its match in the form of the US war (or terror) machine.

And yet it may be too simplistic to think of these two exhibits at the ICP Museum as dialectical representations of resilient life (with one counter-posing the other on the matter of human life and its capacity for endurance, adaptability, and possibly regeneration). Indeed, Edmund Clark’s “The Day the Music Died” is still very much obsessed by the fact of human life. It searches for, begs for, and seeks to retrieve life, or at least traces of it, in places where it may have been taken away, and through objects and things that may bring back memories of what once were normal human existences in specific locales (homes, bedrooms, backyards) that have nothing to do with the violence of war and terrorism. In a way, Clark’s photographic works are cravings for life, for survivability or a more-to-life (as Judith Butler might have it^{ix}), and for resilience, in particular. One of Clark’s projects, “Letters to Omar” (completed in 2010), displays fragments of letters and other documents written about (and some meant to be sent directly to) Libyan born UK resident Omar Deghayes detained at Guantanamo’s Camp Delta. Deghayes only caught a glimpse of some of those written fragments, after they had been thoroughly edited by his captors. In fact, as the ICP Museum’s brochure explains, these edited fragments became crucial to the Guantanamo interrogators’ tactics of control, torture, and punishment of Deghayes.^x Over time, Deghayes, it was reported, came to view these fragments no longer as proofs of support (from people and objects from his previous life), but as tools of coercion and contrivance deployed by his captors. Yet, in order to go on living some sort of life (in the camp, as a detainee), Deghayes was forced to adapt and, in a way, to turn around what might have been traces of a life (and a community, a family, and a home) that once were meaningful to his existence into

something that negatively and oppressively now defined his confined living and being. Put differently, in order to continue to live, in order for his (human) life to somehow make some sort of sense, Deghayes was left with no option but to turn to or surrender to resilience so that, once again, fragments of some enduring human life could still be perceived and preserved. Or, at least, this is what Clark seems to want to suggest remains crucial in this and other photographic projects throughout the exhibit.

Whereas “Then They Came for Me” is unabashedly about championing resilient life, “Edmund Clark: The Day the Music Died” is a far more insidious support for and encouragement of a human life that must adapt, must reinvent itself, and, against all odds, must find ways to survive, or to somehow remain “vital.” In a way, as Evans and Reid intimate, the fate of humanity is at stake (for example, when confronted with war-on-terror era renditions, tortures, and deaths), and resilient life is an ultimate guarantee (or so it is hoped) that “our ways of living” can still matter. In this vein, as Evans and Reid further suggest, resilience is not just “a call to ignite some base level human instinct for survival, even though... the reduction of life to this base level is a natural outcome.”^{xi} Rather, as Evans and Reid correctly state, resilience and resilient life are part of “an ideological project that is informed by political and economic rationalities which offer very particular accounts of life as an ontological problem” and, furthermore, which need to make “the need to become resilient as a *fait accompli*.”^{xii} Thus, Evans and Reid conclude, resilient life becomes a “key strategy in contemporary regimes of power that hallmark vast inequalities in all human classifications.”^{xiii}

Ironically, despite appearances, “Edmund Clark: The Day the Music Died” is perhaps more complicit with contemporary regimes of power (including those that seek to do away with some lives to the alleged benefit of others) than the photographs from the WWII Japanese internment camps taken by Adams, Lange, Miyatake, and others. This is not to say that Clark necessarily intends for his work to be supportive of the US war on terror or US securitization and counter-terror strategies. But what this means though is that Clark’s blind endorsement of resilience and resilient life, even if and when human bodies are not on display, undercuts the critical aspirations in many of his projects. Put differently, a desire to refigure and reconfigure human life at all costs, to allow it to adapt to some of the worst possible (inhuman?) conditions, makes Clark’s seemingly critical photographic work another moment (perhaps not a crucial moment, but a moment nonetheless) in “the ideological project” put forward by dominant contemporary “political and economic rationalities” and instrumentalities that have a lot to gain in keeping the US-led war on terror and its policies and practices of detention, rendition, torture, violence, and often death alive. Thus, similar to the way we are meant to read the “Then They Came for Me” exhibit, and even if it does so in a less visually obvious fashion, the call for resilient life as it is presented in Clark’s projects at the ICP Museum blunts much of the critical work that his photography is hoping to perform.

Notes

ⁱ For more on these two exhibits and the International Center of Photography Museum, see <https://www.icp.org/facilities/museum>.

ⁱⁱ See <https://www.icp.org/exhibitions/then-they-came-for-me-incarceration-of-japanese-americans-during-world-war-ii>; last accessed on 03/15/2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ See <https://www.icp.org/exhibitions/edmund-clark-the-day-the-music-died>; last accessed on 03/15/2018.

^{iv} One notable exception is his more recent “Body Politic” piece (2016, updated in 2018) that juxtaposes mug shots of recent US presidents and secretaries of state and defense, authoritarian leaders from the Middle East (some of whom have now been killed), al Qaeda leaders, or Taliban leaders, among other faces.

^v See “Edmund Clark: The Day the Music Died” museum brochure (New York: ICP Museum, 2018), p. 12.

^{vi} Brad Evans and Julian Reid, *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014), p. 30.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 30.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 30.

^{ix} Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

^x See “Edmund Clark: The Day the Music Died” museum brochure, p. 14.

^{xi} Evans and Reid, *Resilient Life*, p. 31.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 32.