

# [***The Japanese photographer celebrating community in rural America***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:69RT-JNC1-JBSS-S022-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; "I never really paid attention to ***politics*** before the 2016 election," confided Japanese photographer Fumi Nagasaka over video call. Nagasaka moved to New York in 2002, witnessing two Obama wins before Trump's divisive election victory seven years ago. "When it happened I just thought, 'Okay, this country is falling apart'. Everybody started to be angry."

Nagasaka's concern then was about her practice: Leaving Japan for the United States had provided her with a sense of freedom to explore creative pathways she felt were otherwise limited. "In the US, it didn't seem to matter what kind of education you had, as long you had talent and knowledge you had opportunities," she said. In the aughts she began shooting American street style photography for a Japanese magazine, which would ultimately shape her more personal, culture-focused work. "I wasn't confident with my English, but photography became a tool for me to meet people," she explained.

Harnessing this sentiment, Nagasaka subsequently undertook a series of long-term projects examining adolescence across America, Japan, Canada and Europe, publishing the books "Untitled Youth" in 2016, "Teenage Riot" two years later, and in 2022, "Marching Wolves". In 2017, incentivised by the election result and curious to rectify her unfamiliarity with the American South, she made the first of many trips that would become her new monograph, "Dora, Yerkwood, Walker County, Alabama."

Travelling to Dora, a town of approximately 2,300 people, with her New York neighbor Tanya Rouse (a native of Alabama, her daughter had been one of Nagasaka's earlier subjects), the photographer quickly became privy to the contrasts between New York City and the social and physical characteristics of the wider country. "I'd been to Los Angeles and San Francisco, but I'd never really been to a small rural town," she recalled.

"I met some great people," she continued. "It was Halloween and homecoming, so there were football games, a parade, a dance - it was the biggest event in town, so I photographed it." She and Rouse decided then to return every year around the same time, and the new book is a rich and intimate document of their six years moving around the county.

Using a heavy duty, medium format camera however, Nagasaka's presence initially garnered skepticism. While teens loosened when she shared her Instagram handle and they could trace her portfolio, others were harder to reassure. To remedy this, she contacted the local newspaper. "Everybody reads it, so we reached out about my project and an article came out. People started to understand what I did then, and I expanded the project."

While working on the series in 2020, Nagasaka took on a separate commission to document the presidential election, an experience that further highlighted a gulf in the attitudes of the friends she had made and those back in New York, as well as compelling her to confront the disparities between the racial groups she encountered.

"Trump supporters were easy to find in Dora, they wore Trump hats and had Trump flags, but the Biden supporters were difficult. Nobody was putting signs up," she remembered. "It was during Covid and in Yerkwood (a predominantly Black area south of Dora), nobody was outside. We knocked on doors, because I had photographed some people the year before, and were told that if they put signs outside, people would steal them."

In the book itself, there are no images of flags or explicit references to ***politics***, despite its role in the book's genesis, having spurred Nagasaka's initial intrigue in the South and the way ***politics*** reverberates in communities. As the photographer acknowledges in the book's afterward, "Many people, including those who live there, sometimes associate the South with poverty and rural blight, and while it is undeniable that those things exist, what I found in Walker County was beautiful, charming and full of love."

Instead, "Dora, Yerkwood, Walker County, Alabama" examines the human condition, employing the camera as a device to witness moments of joy and celebration, as well as quiet and tenderness. "This project changed my life and the way I see things, and this book is my love letter to the community," asserted Nagasaka, whose care and warmth for the people she met is plain throughout.

"I didn't want to bring ***politics*** into the project," she continued, alluding to the book's final form and the comfort she subsequently found in Walker County. "Even though that was happening in the town, I left it outside. I'm not a photojournalist, I'm an artist, and I was focused on celebrating this beautiful town." Any political noise then, the viewer brings themselves, but what ultimately reads most prominently in the images is a sense of intimacy, extended from the community to Nagasaka and reciprocated in the work.

"Dora, Yerkwood, Walker County, Alabama" by Fumi Nagasaka is published by [*GOST Books*](https://gostbooks.com/products/dora-yerkwood-walker-county-alabama) and out now.

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