

THE EVERYDAY PROJECTS

The Everyday Projects – Lesson 6.5 Activity

Name _____

Class/Period or Grade/Teacher _____

Consider the passages below. Taken from four essays in the Everyday Africa book, these passages distill what Everyday Africa — the book and the project as a whole — is about.

The essays, in their entirety, are included in the [Everyday Africa book PDF](#), and we encourage you to read them — but for the purposes of this exercise, we'll focus on the passages cited here.

The passages are divided into four sections, by author. Following each section there are a few questions for you to respond to.

1. “On Illusion and the Ordinary,” by Maaza Mengiste

“...as I look at one image after the other, it is the word ‘ordinary’ that keeps circling back. Here is a sunset. Here is a female boxer training. There is a DJ spinning at a nightclub. Friends gathered in a dimly lit bar. A sly cow staring back at the camera. Girls playing in a field. Marching bands. Car rides. Homework. Families. Rooftops. What is here but everyday life, frozen and captured before moving on and leaving the rest of us behind?”

“...a picture is separated from its larger meaning. A photo shows us a moment that has been torn away from its place in time and history. It, too, is not without its flaws. When we look at a picture, we cannot always know what it is we are seeing, until we understand what has been excluded from the frame. Until we know what time has wrought. We cannot look at something striking ... without also interrogating the context for its existence.”

“What is absent are those things experienced before this, all those parts of history that reside perhaps most powerfully in the territory of the mind, in memory ... Image is layered, nuanced by what it is we cannot see. But what it is we are seeing quite plainly. Normalcy has come back, the ordinary is here, every day can be like any other. But this image is reminding us of something else: Not everything stops just because something else begins, despite what the news might imply in certain images, despite what some might insist as they showcase particular stories of Africa...”

Questions:

- What is important about Mengiste's use of the term "ordinary" and how are photographs that depict "ordinary" things different from what you usually see in photography and photojournalism?
- Why is it important to think about what has been "excluded from the frame" — the things the photographer chose not to include in an image?

2. “The Africa Photographer, the Camera, and Home,” by Nana Kofi Acquah

“Photography came to Africa as part of colonialism. Missionaries often used photographs to solicit support from churches and organizations back home, while colonialists used them for strategic and propaganda purposes. Due to the harsh climate of tropical Africa and the slow and difficult processes involved in making images like the daguerreotype and calotype, early photographs of Africa tended to have fewer people in them. But the Brownie, introduced in 1900, changed all that. Even though it was not immediately embraced by professional photographers, the Brownie allowed Westerners to make photographs of people due to its portability and relative ease of use. Today, of course, camera technology has revolutionized photography for us all, making the craft accessible in ways it never was before. Meanwhile, African photographers’ use of this technology has created a revolution all its own, producing work that is unrecognizable alongside that of the colonizers.”

“The main reason for the drastic change in how young Africans interact with photographs is social media. It is not uncommon to see selfie-sticks popping up in some of the remotest parts of Africa. Easy access to the Internet and mobile phones has made such platforms as Instagram and Facebook very popular. For the professional African photographer, the mobile phone and social media afford them the fastest route to recognition, granting access to new audiences and markets that were totally shut to them in the past. This new audience is mainly a curious one—a world that is surprised to see that Africa is nothing like what they saw in the Tarzan movies and many others like them.

The Everyday Africa platform on Instagram may very well be the biggest new visual library of the continent. To task African photographers—collaborating here with discerning Westerners—with the burden of changing how the continent is perceived through photography might be overwhelming, but they are nonetheless putting together the pieces of a new puzzle, a picture of the real Africa. For the West, Everyday Africa has been enlightening, but for Africans, especially Africans in the diaspora, it has been inspiring: an affirmation of what they have always said about home.”

Questions:

- In what ways did the difficulties of early photography encourage some of the harmful stereotypes of Africa that persist today?
- How have innovations in technology impacted not only the ways in which the people and countries of Africa have been represented in photographs, but the people who are making the images as well?

3. “All the Stories,” by Austin Merrill and Peter DiCampo

“We must hear all the stories... And by hearing all the stories we will find in fact points of contact and communication, and the world story, the Great Story, will have a chance to develop.” -Chinua Achebe

“Everyday Africa began with a photograph of a man in an elevator. But it was born of images much older than that. Photos of famine and warlords and victims of AIDS. Genocide, gaudy corruption, and children holding guns or with bloated bellies and flies gathered around their faces. Bare-breasted women with bundles balanced on their heads. Lavishly pierced noses and lips, bodies painted with mud or covered by masks. Men and women bowed in servitude to their colonial enslavers, laborers yoked and chained and lashed with whips.

Many of these images told important stories that forced the world to reckon with long-ignored realities. Others were little more than a colonization of the African narrative, an objectification of the exotic. Taken together, these themes came to define the continent for the West, leaving a picture of Africa that was exaggerated and oversimplified, inaccurate in its incompleteness. We knew not of scholars bent at their desks, of shopkeepers tallying receipts, of architecture, theater, or high fashion, of dinners at home, adults commuting to work, or children at play with their friends. We saw the sunsets, yes, and the majestic animals on safari, but these, too, fed a cliché. As did the smiles—the depictions of people who seemed to have been intentionally photographed in poses of happiness, as if to marvel at the way they were able to rise up against all odds, defiant in their squalor.

The concept behind Everyday Africa is a simple one—sharing photographs of everyday life to combat the stereotypes that dominate stories coming out of the continent.”

Questions:

- Re-read the quote from Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian writer. Now that you've seen photographs from Everyday Africa, can you think of things in your life that you have in common with some of the people and places depicted in the Everyday Africa images?
- Everyday Africa features images of normal life that avoid stereotype. But what about conflict, corruption, poverty, etc — is it important to see these kinds of stories as well?

4. From “Everyday Tomorrow,” by Stephen Mayes:

“...the online stream quietly yet insistently subverts expectations of what is noteworthy and remarkable about Africa and indeed the very nature of photography and how we’re used to seeing the world through the lens of a camera. In this book, the everyday is bound and made collectible in a process that imbues the most ordinary events and images with significance that may not yet be visible, but which to these same eyes in twenty years will look completely different. It’s a rare opportunity for our future selves to look back at a way of seeing that will have disappeared, as online platforms evolve into new forms or succumb to pressures that force them dark.

What will we see with these eyes of the future, as we look back at the casual observations gathered here from the cities, towns, and villages of early twenty-first century Africa? The beauty of the images will survive, and that will suffice to satisfy many; for that alone this book will have a justified place in history. For the more curious who delve into the comments pulled from the live Instagram experience, there may be astonishment that an iPad in the hands of a schoolchild in Ghana could cause such surprise, or that three women carrying produce through a Kigali street could lead to a discussion of truth versus reality. These are everyday circumstances that, in the context of their original publication, reflected the co-existence of traditional and modern practices across the continent and simultaneously exposed prejudices and sensitivities fostered by decades of postcolonial media. Historians opening this book will see evidence of how the mobile phone camera changed popular understanding of the world, shaping knowledge and attitudes in ways that weren’t immediately obvious as the changes were happening. Everyday Africa brings all these phenomena to the fore, and the book exposes them like a flare that illuminates a brief moment, allowing scrutiny even as the images on the feed fade away.”

“Approaching Everyday Africa with misaligned expectations is disconcerting, much like looking through a telescope from the objective lens instead of the eyepiece. ‘Where did everything go? Where is the Africa I know from every other photograph I’ve seen?’ This frustrated expectation is revealed in the anguished comments of Instagram viewers seeking to impose old world order on new world imagery. A child bathing in a puddle must represent poverty and can’t only be seen as a specific child’s enjoyment as they play in water (which, understood as a detail of individual experience, is common to rich and poor around the world). Our

perspective has been so distorted by decades of strictly formatted media reporting on Africa that sometimes we can no longer see what we're looking at.

The use of stereotype to tell the story of many by telling the story of a single symbolic figure has bred a blindness to the individual, and the legacy of this media trope is a confused tangle of conflicting perceptions. In the old way individuals are obscured because they are seen to represent the lives of others. Removing the expectation of stereotype reveals individuals in a more personal light. In fact, symbols of distress that are traditionally assigned by photojournalists are not necessarily evident in the everyday lives of even the most anxious people—to an eye trained to seek cues of despair, significant social issues may not be apparent at all. It takes careful study to find refugees in these pages, or the hardship of unemployment, or the impact of HIV, homelessness, or homophobia, but it's all here amidst the wedding anniversaries, shopping lines, and bathers. Stress and distress mingle with joy and fulfillment because they are embodied in the same people. The limitation of traditional reporting has been to assign a single role to each individual, whereas in life we each know many roles.

On Instagram, *Everyday Africa* contains all these experiences side by side in a narrative that is confused and coherent all at once, with neither beginning nor end, looking much like life itself. Delighting in the moment, each online image exists only in the present as part of the endlessly rolling river of Instagram impressions. Each new post is carried down that river, soon out of sight and out of mind, an unusually titillating flotsam that stays with us only long enough for a quick “like” or hashtag before the next provocation arrives.”

“With all of this wrapped between the covers of this book, *Everyday Africa* makes a simple but emphatic statement: The truth is rarely pure and never simple, and we do ourselves a disservice by allowing others to distill complicated reality into easy summaries. It is our responsibility to look, think, and learn. Hopefully, our future eyes will look at this with new wisdom and consider it to be a pure and simple truth.”

Questions:

- Mayes writes about the expectations people have when looking at photographs made in Africa, expectations born of stereotypes that represent “the story of many by telling the story of a single symbolic figure.” What would people expect if they were to look at photographs of your life? Are there elements of your daily life that could fit into stereotypes? How could you make images about your life and/or community that would tell a more complete and true story?
- How do you think people will think of Africa in 100 years? Will the continent still be burdened by the stereotypes that are so prevalent today? Is it possible that photography could change this trajectory?