Throughout history, photojournalists have created iconic images while working with cultures different than their own. Even as the photo industry changes and access to photographic equipment spreads globally, many photographers still work in cross-cultural situations. In order to understand how photojournalists work cross-culturally in order to create representative imagery and not just perpetuate inaccuracies, I interviewed three photojournalists: Mary Beth Meehan, Charles Fox and Peter Di Campo. These three discussed issues with cross-cultural photography, benefits of this work and best practices to obtain the most accurate representation of their subjects.

All three of these photojournalists have photographed subjects who are outside their own culture in long-term projects and daily work. Peter Di Campo is an American documentary photographer and a co-creator of Everyday Africa, a collection of cellphone images across the African continent. This assortment of imagery aims to develop a more complete visual portrayal of life in Africa. Di Campo focuses much of his work on international issues that cross borders and impact local and international communities. Di Campo aims to deconstruct the usual narratives
and offer new narratives outside the norm (DiCampo, 2017). This is important to
DiCampo because “If I just went to rural Africa and photographed misery, it’s like,
what’s the point? It is the already common held idea, it is like, why bother?”
DiCampo’s view on deconstructing the usual visual narrative developed from a trip
to the Ivory Coast. During this trip, DiCampo and his fellow journalist, Austin Merrill
were working on a story about the post-election violence and cocoa trade’s impact
(DiCampo, 2017). They noticed a difference between the photographs they made on
their iPhones versus the photographs made with his professional camera. This
dichotomy spoke to how DiCampo’s preconceived notions of the photographs that
he had to make for the story were shifting what he would photograph with the
professional camera. DiCampo explained that not only were the images different,
but how he was thinking was entirely different. DiCampo and the Everyday photo
projects are bringing a diverse set of voices into creating the visual narratives of
different places, which allows for stories to be told from different perspectives. Each
contributor is allowed to put their truth forward for others to see. “Truth doesn’t
actually have a capital t,” DiCampo said. “We can call it objective journalism, but
what we decided that is important in each situation is very subjective and is very
dependent on our cultural backgrounds that we bring to the table. So, I think we
have to acknowledge that.”

For Charles Fox, a U.K. and Cambodia based British freelance photographer
and educator, the process of acknowledging one’s cultural background is a common
occurrence. “I work cross-culturally, which is problematic and I question it all the
time, because you should,” Fox said: “It’s not just questioning as a photographer it is
questioning as a person engaging in a context that is not your own.” Fox focuses on the legacy of conflict and colonialism in long-term projects. This focus led to creating FOUNDCambodia, a not-for-profit digital archive of Cambodian portraits. The aim of the project is to create a visual history of Cambodia, both before and after the Khmer Rouge regime. Even with the long-term work in Cambodia and obsession with understanding the place and people, Fox is still wary of how close he can get to understand it. “No matter what you know about a space or a context, you have to, you always have to remember that I am foreign to this space and there are boundaries or limitations to my understanding to this space,” Fox said.

The limitations to understanding a space encourages Mary Beth Meehan, an American freelance photographer and educator, to always assume that the people on the ground are the experts of their own lives and their own situation. “We journalists used to think that we were the experts and we used to go out and use the community to make the points that we wanted to make,” Meehan said. Meehan’s way of thinking shifts the power dynamic of a photojournalist and subject and allows for the community being photographed to have more power in the way the narrative is shaped. Her goal is to create connections between people, to raise questions about divisions and to inspire curiosity and empathy. In order to create representative images, she spends much of her time with subjects talking and asking questions. This allows for a space where she can just listen and learn. “You identify your themes, you go back into the community and say this is what I am interested in and ask the community if this is what they would say the main issues are,” Meehan said (personal communication, Aug. 21, 2017), “and then ask, who could tell me
about that. This is my sketch, what do you think of my sketch? They will tell you if you are pushing something. Let the community help you amend your understanding of the place and photograph what they tell you is important.” This process takes time and an ability to go back to the people that you are working with.

Time is an important thing for all three of these photographers because it allows for an opportunity to learn, to go back and be confident in what you are saying. DiCampo sees major merit in going back, “You could stay for one hour or twelve hours, but just because it is the first point of contact, it isn’t the duration of time that is going to make everything. Actually, when you leave and come back the next day or whenever it is, it actually shows you are invested in this and moves things forward leaps and bounds and allows people to let you into their life more.” Meehan agrees that time and being able to go back is a strong method when working cross-culturally. “You have to feel really good when you put something out there. Whatever you have said about it, you have to feel really good that you’ve spent enough time to stand behind it. And, sometimes that can happen quickly and sometimes, it takes a lot of visits back,” Meehan said. Fox also sees time as a way to understand the topic and examine other photographic work on the topic. “With experience, time and engagement, you understand what has been said and what hasn’t been said. You’ve seen it go on for a long period of time,” Fox said. DiCampo agrees that consuming a lot of media and reflection on what is not been shown is a good starting point.

Even before a photographer begins making pictures, there are opportunities to begin to understand the story. “What you can do is read enough,” DiCampo said.
This allows for you to understand why the issue is important for the people that you will be photographing. Photojournalists can’t just look for situations that fit into their project, there has to be a reason why the community would want to be a part of the project. Meehan gets direct feedback from the communities she is photographing to understand what issues are important and to be critiqued on her photography. “Cultivate advisors there. Let them look at your work,” Meehan said. This allows for the subjects to have a voice in the photographic process and explain their understanding of the imagery. Fox says understanding of a story comes from experience and observation. “You have to watch a culture and you have to watch a space and you have to understand and experience the country for what it is,” Fox said.

The danger in not understanding a culture is both a detriment to the people they are photographing and the photographer themselves. “It can’t be the white guy with three cameras and his seven press passes from his last seven conflicts, dropping into a space, and photographing the other,” Fox said. He believes there is a shift from this methodology and is thankful for it. Meehan recently felt her own preconceptions kicking in as she sat in all-Spanish church and realized she didn’t know what she was looking at or seeing. “I could feel all of my preconceptions, judgments, and assumptions kicking in,” Meehan said. DiCampo sees the lack of research or understanding as a sign that the photographer will just approach each assignment the same way and has a monolithic view of the world.

Although all three photographers understand the difficulty of photographing across cultures, there is a consensus that it can be done respectfully,
representatively and with merit. "You go slowly. You’re careful. You learn," said Meehan, “Let them (subjects) look at your work. Leave yourself open to critique by those who you photograph.” This process will allow for a truthful representation of a people or community, which contributes to the greater conversation about a topic or place.

Being a part of the greater conversation is something Fox believes in as a photojournalist. “My perspective is different. Some people say if you are a foreigner you shouldn’t be there, but I am doing it from my perspective. Basically, we are talking along the same paths, but we are doing it in very different ways of communicating very different things,” Fox said. This different way of communicating brings different pieces of the story out to the viewers, which provides a more complete understanding. “I am a strong believer that stories need a marriage of insider and outsider perspectives. I think outsiders bring a critical eye that insiders might not have and, of course, insiders can contextualize things or just sort of understand the nuances in ways that an outsider cannot," DiCampo said.

For many photojournalists, working across cultures is a daily occurrence. It is important to pay attention to how cultures are represented. This means that photojournalists may have to go a bit slower, spend more time, and listen deeper, but this is what photojournalism is about and where its strength is. The connected world is now able to provide photographs from those within a culture and those who are from another. This marriage of viewpoints will contribute to a more complete visual narrative and inform to a higher degree than ever before.
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