

## Human Subjects and “Green” Protest in Black African Photography at the Ninth Rencontres de Bamako

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### Introduction

At the ninth Rencontres de Bamako exhibition in 2011, answering an invitation for photographers to address the theme of “For a sustainable world,” George Osodi, Abdoulaye Barry, Tsyangirayi Mukwazhi, Nyaba Leon Ouedraogo, and Mário Macilau exhibited photographs of humans living amidst environmental disaster. Documenting communities affected by oil extraction, fishermen faced with climate chaos, as well as lives of diamond and granite miners and e-recyclers, these black African photographers risk replicating a documentary photographic tradition of picturing atrocity and beautifying the oppressed, yet they enjoy neither the real or imagined distance from ecological disaster required to shoot purposely unpopulated landscape photographs—like those photographers David Hanson, Davis Maisel, Chris Jordan, Alan Berger, Peter Goin, Henry Fair, Emmet Gowin, and Edward Burtynsky whose work represents contemporary white North American and Canadian environmental photography and enters the discourse of the toxic sublime, defined by Jennifer Peeples as “*the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe*” (375). Rather, as Emmanuel Iduma claims, African creative work is produced out “of political necessity, as well as in response to despair felt in African bodies” (Iduma n.p.).

There is nothing sublime about Osodi, Mukwazhi, Ouedraogo, Macilau, Kodia, and Barry’s photographs of human survival in the epicenter of ecological disaster. There is no “agreeable horror,” no ethical room in these documents for marveling at human technological prowess; their aesthetically commanding shots of devastated environments are always paired with or include the human subject, disallowing the viewer to feel separate from what is pictured (Gatlin 720). Unlike, say, Edward Burtynsky’s decision to withhold information about the corresponding corporations responsible for the depicted environmental destruction in the titles of his *Manufactured Landscapes* photographs, blame is never hidden in the titles, artist statements, and essays that accompany Osodi’s, Barry’s, Mukwazhi’s, Ouedraogo’s, and Macilau’s photographs. These photographs, rather, elicit feelings of guilt in privileged viewers, many of whom are the foreigners who outnumbered African visitors during the first week at the ninth Rencontres de Bamako festival (Peeples 384; Famighetti n.p.). The emotionally open, seriously engaged, privileged viewer must meet the gaze of those photographed—who live with, and often embody, the effects of neo-colonisation (as defined by Kwame Nkrumah as the process by which “foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world”) and nationally-inscribed environmental harm, and is thereby implicated—stuck in a deathly dance with the photographed subjects who inhabit toxic landscapes known for their linkages with everyday consumption (Nkrumah 7). Acknowledging one’s complicity in another’s despair is other than the measuring required of the viewer of white Western environmental photography engages of “one’s life choices against the sites of destruction,” which Jennifer Peeples argues facilitates the privileged viewer’s understanding of “the need for alternative resource and waste protocols and decision-making,” but which Jill Gatlin counters does little to disturb any privileged viewer’s identity as consumer, polluter, or political agent (Peeples 388; Gatlin 718). Regardless which side one takes in Peeples’ and Gatlin’s argument, the decision to photograph the human face of environmental degradation *does* disturb—by invoking in a very emotional, immediate way the collective action necessary to redress the destruction. If

anything, Osodi's, Mukwazhi's, Oeudraogo's, Macilau's, Kodia's, and Barry's photographs are, for privileged viewers *their conscience*, as in many ways, it is not only modernization and industrialization that has imposed an ideological shift from human resources to material resources, imposing human domination upon nature that has brought with it "untold hardships" in Africa, but also neo-colonisation and the repercussions of globalization (or "the *ideology* of democracy and the dictatorial freedom of the global Market," as defined by the invitation put forth by the curators of the ninth Recontres de Bamako) that are to blame for African ecocides (Eze 628; "Recontres"). Perhaps this is why Osodi, Mukwazhi, Oeudraogo, Macilau, Kodia, and Barry all believe in the power of photographs as catalysts for change. If their photographs are beautiful, it is the end result of these photographers' belief that by photographing they might be able to help make environmental justice happen.

### **The Human, the Nonhuman, Social Documentary Photography, and "Green" Protest**

There is a long history of environmentalism in Africa, traced in part to indigenous ethics of not taking more than needed from nature, inter-dependence and coexistence with nature, and a metaphysical outlook that dissolves dichotomies between animate and inanimate things, between the sacred and the profane, and the communal and the individual (Ojomo 102-7). It is this history, this African cosmology in which everything has influence upon everything else, as everything (even dead material) radiates a life force or wave-particle that interacts with other forces, and in which the environment is not separate from the human, that begins to trouble the afore-championed anthropocentric focus of black African photographers, and which serves as the basis of Cajetan Iheka's critique of black African ecocriticism as only considering people rendered poor by ecological violence rather than the interconnection and 'proximity' of human and nonhuman beings.

Iheka argues in *Naturalizing Africa* that postcolonial critics are taken with the environmental justice approach "because of the stress it puts on human concerns and its critique of inequality," not to mention "the premium it places on social justice for the humans caught in environmental disasters..." (7). Quick to posit that he is far from making essentialist claims about "Africans as ecologists par excellence" as there are indigenous societies that "engage in indiscriminate practices that seem devoid of ecological consideration," Iheka draws upon African cosmology ("the stories and social practices of indigenous communities") to read against an "era of hypercapitalism, with its commodification of everything," as "these societies," he finds, "posit a relationship to the environment that differs from the commodification of life" (8). Like Guy Debord, who theorizes in *Society of the Spectacle*, that urbanism or "city planning" "is capitalism's method for taking over the natural and human environment" and will not stop until it "can and must refashion the totality of space into its own particular *décor*," Iheka rejects "the imbalance of power and geopolitical calculation that make certain parts of the world expendable, disposable...[and] the status of African environments as sacrifice zones for discarded discontents of globalization" (Debord 121; Iheka 158). If there is a solution Iheka proposes in *Naturalizing Africa*, it is that the "ecocritical challenge is...to envisage 'green' resistance strategies that are effective and equally take the environment into serious consideration" (164). Insertion of nonhumans into black African ecocriticism must not come "at the expense of genuine concern of human beings," he underlines, as that would amount "to privileging one life form over others" (Iheka 163). Rather, like Byron Caminero-Santangelo, Iheka argues that African literature points to indigenous relationships with the land and with ancestral spirits and gods as providing the foundation of community sustainability.

Despite the fact that the environmental photography of Osodi, Mukwazhi, Oeudraogo, Macilau, Kodia, and Barry, like Iheka's reading of black African ecocriticism, relies upon a

human-centered script, such documentary work may ultimately serve as an increasingly “green” resistance strategy that takes the environment into consideration precisely because such photographers foreground the human in their photographs of toxic environments. Although the ninth Rencontre de Bamako’s call was expressly for artwork engaging with environmental resistance, no photograph of environmental and human degradation, regardless its author, *inherently* calls for environmental and social justice, as Susan Sontag argues (“Rencontres de Bamako”; Sontag). But no image, John Tagg reminds us, is neutral either (Tagg 63). Social documentary photography has a long history of controversy as regards the aestheticization of the documentary image. The work of Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado has oft served as the fundamental critical example showcasing criticism of social documentary photography that posits that documentary photography cannot adequately serve as a call for social justice (the exact critique offered by Jill Gatlin leveled at environmental photographs operating within the discourse of the “toxic sublime”). Yet most often, unlike Western environmental photography, social documentary photography most often takes as its focus the human subject, and for this reason Salgado has been accused of being obsessed with formal elements that beautify anguished subjects. Such beautification of tragedy, it is argued, reinforces viewer passivity, as, critics argue, to “aestheticize tragedy is the fastest way to anaesthetize the feelings of those who are witnessing it” (Strauss 5). Salgado’s beautifully composed portraits of misery, Susan Sontag concedes, are exhibited in “highly commercialized situations,” thereby reducing his unnamed subjects to powerlessness and globalizing their distress (Sontag). Others, however, argue that Salgado photographs in solidarity, and that his photographs speak to what is not visible and has not been spoken. David Levi Strauss contends, in fact, that the “idea that the more transformed or ‘aestheticized’ an image is, the less ‘authentic’ or politically valuable it becomes, is one that needs to be seriously questioned. “Why *can’t* beautiful,” he asks, “be a call to action?” (Strauss 9). It is up to viewers to seriously engage with social documents, as such art, Strauss argues, has much to teach us about power. Other critics, like Ariella Azoulay, echo Strauss’s call, arguing that photographs “provide jumping-off points for public reflection on...advanced capitalism” (Edwards 90).

Strauss’s and Azoulay’s refusal to participate in, as Jon Soske terms it, the “mind-numbing” either/or polarity as regards the aesthetics and politics of social documentary photography, as well as the assertion that the photographic series explored in this paper—Osodi’s “Delta Nigeria: The Rape of Paradise”; Mukwazhi’s “Zimbabwe Diamond Mining” and “Angola Granite Mining”; Ouedraogo’s “L’Enfer du Cuivre” (“Hell of Copper”); Macilau’s “The Profit Corner”; and Barry’s “Pêcheurs de nuit” (“Night Fishermen”)—cannot be read as representations of the “toxic sublime,” further the argument this paper makes of the potential these series have to implicate the privileged viewer to consider the “choices we make and the landscapes we influence,” and to act upon this awareness to affect environmental change (Soske n.p.; Milbourne 136). These photographs, presented together with titles and captions, reveal the savagery of neo-colonization, and in this way turn the neo-colonial gaze back on itself.

### **Delta Nigeria: The Rape of Paradise**

George Osodi’s depiction of the human tragedy and ecological destruction of the Nigerian Delta wrought by the oil industry thrust him into the international spotlight. The series, *Delta Nigeria: The Rape of Paradise*, was published as a monograph in 2011. Shot over a five-year period (2003-2007), the more than 200 photographs detail what life is like in the oil-rich Delta. In these photographs that Francis Ugiomoh calls “photographic essays,” as they “provide an endless labyrinth of reflections, and this is where their dialectical value lies,” children play on old oil industry equipment, women dry tapioca in the heat of gas flares from the rigs, and militants fight over bunkered oil (Ugiomoh 30). We see impoverished schools, people farming, fishing, living

and working in the heat and light of gas flares, not to mention battling for a larger share of oil reserves. Poverty and violence is reflected in the sheen of oil that covers everything from fish to flip-flops. Every part of this Ogoni territory, Osodi's homeland, is contaminated. In the spirit of Ken Saro-Wiwa—whose state execution made the environment “a keystone in Nigerian art and discourse”—Osodi's monograph protests the multinational industry that has transformed a lush ecosystem (once one of the most biologically unique terrestrial freshwater and marine habitats in the world) into what is now one of the most polluted places on earth (Nnamdi 66).

Text accompanying Osodi's photographs of women tending to their tapioca drying in the flares' heat informs the viewer that since the late 1960s, the associated gas from oil extraction in the Delta has been separated and flared off daily by oil companies. Such flares emit, as Tam Fiofori writes, “a dangerous 24 hour artificial light with fumes of deadly poisons” and “cause acid rain that in turn poisons both the soil and the creeks; stunting the growth of agricultural produce and killing most marine life. Buildings are affected and roofs soon rot away. The gases burn the skin of humans and cause skin cancer. They also affect the eyes and the digestive system” (Osodi 163). For viewers like Francis Umiogoh, who know the Delta intimately, Osodi's photograph of a man taking a bath in Port Harcourt in an outdoor tub is not just a photograph of a man bathing in water from a broken private borehole pipe, but an image of a man bathing “with a bucket formerly used for storing paint” in a “predominantly gray” environment which is the result of “acid rain, for normally the unfinished cement block walls would appear greenish due to the growth of algae in humid regions like Port Harcourt” (Osodi 134-5; Osodi 8). This, too, the reader of Osodi's monograph learns while perusing this Trolley Books coffee-table monograph.

By using irony and paradoxes inherent to scenes he photographs, critic Guilia Paoletti argues that Osodi “questions the role of multinationals as well as militants, Nigerian authorities, and local inhabitants” (Paoletti 83). Such irony abounds in Osodi's photograph of the cue for petrol with men crowded before a service station, camped out on their motorbikes, eating, hunched over, waiting, looking toward the pumps (Osodi 104-5). And such paradox is evident in Osodi's photograph of a corrugated tin-sided house on the side of which someone has scrawled the words “TRUST NO BODY.” In front of the house sits a young girl, looking slightly away from the photographer. Her dress is checkered and gathered at the neck and arms. Her toothless innocence offsets the scrawled message, and yet the message drowns out everything around it. This is what neo-colonisation has done, the message implies; it has destroyed innocent communities, drowned relations, and pitted one against another in a crazy, violent, sick dance (Osodi 232-3). Flipping through Osodi's monograph, the paradox multiplies with photographs of environmental and human degradation placed dialectically beside images of vibrant cultural life complete with traditional chiefs, marriage ceremonies, secret societies, church services, shrines, barbershops, and night markets. In the introduction to the monograph, Ugiomoh articulates that Osodi's work is “driven by the sole objective to inspire a positive political action that is rooted in a collective national will to redress the effects of environmental and human neglect in the Niger Delta region” (Osodi 9-10).

When photographing militant groups, including one group's kidnapping of a Western oil executive, sensationalism takes back stage in Osodi's photographs, despite the evident face masks, camouflage fatigues, Kalashnikovs, and Rocket Propelled Grenades. Instead, the scene is rendered in a matter of fact way and the viewer learns from the accompanying text that militancy and bunkering (siphoning off oil) is a result of unfair oil exploitation. In a region where 70% of the population lives beneath the poverty line and “development projects paid for by the oil companies to build schools or clinics...are increasingly being perceived by the local population as meagre handouts compared to the rewards that the oil companies' beneficiaries enjoy,” such

bunkering is inevitable (Querouil). The quest for resource control and self-determination is a long, ongoing civil war, and we see this in Osodi's series.

Osodi's photographs of slums and homelessness are juxtaposed with photographs of elders dressed immaculately and traditionally. In one shot, these elders pose, expressions impervious. They command respect; they stare back. They insist upon their selfhood. In this refusal, they share, strangely, something in common with hostage Macon Hawkins, as captured on film by Osodi looking old and hunched in a boat with a rocket grenade held to his neck. Men dressed in camouflage and black stocking masks surround him. The militants' brute force, the veins in their arms, their collective bulk and masked appearances threaten (Osodi 292-3). Yet the caption to this photo is Hawkins' own acknowledgement of the charade off which he profits:

They wanted us to look at these little villages. They all have dirt floors, and there were no schools. It was a painful life they lived. I didn't like being a captive but then looking back on it I think those people did what they thought they had to do to try to get something out of all that billions of dollars. I can't hold it against them. They want a fair share and they'll tell you right quick what they want. And it's not unreasonable. (Osodi 292)

As Kerstin Winking argues, Osodi demonstrates that "art does not have to be a bland servant to global capital, but can function as a forum for the expression of discontent with global politics" (Winking 625). Osodi himself says,

I have always seen and believed in photography as an instrument for conservation and change... Due to my belief in and my great love for humanity and fairness to the earth, I tend to focus on photographing issue-related subjects, especially within the contemporary African landscape. (Odufunade 92)

### **Zimbabwe Diamond Mining and Angola Granite Mining**

Zimbabwean photographer Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi claims that he photographs best at home, close to the heart. Indeed, the feeling of closeness, of his camaraderie shared with diamond miners in Marange, Zimbabwe, is more than evident in his *Zimbabwe Diamond Mining* series. Examine his photograph of a dust-covered woman worker holding a shovel at the lip of a diamond pit. A woman to her right laughs. Others, sitting around the pit, look toward Mukwazhi, smiling broadly. The central figure has her hair wrapped and wears a blouse that is missing buttons. Her expression is that of someone who almost dares the photographer to notice her; there is something beautiful and not at all bitter about the way she stands up to the camera aimed down at her. Around her, the color of the workers' garb takes the edge off the omnipresent yellow dust. The beauty in this photograph arises from how these workers present themselves to Mukwazhi (Mukwazhi "Zimbabwe" n.p.).

In *Zimbabwe Diamond Mining*, Mukwazhi focuses on mining families. In one shot, a figure with a pickaxe frames a bawling toddler. The ground beneath the pickaxe and screaming child is unforgiving, the dirt so dry it is basically sand. In another shot, a miner holds a dust-covered baby out toward Mukwazhi's lens. Her hooded eyes make her look tired and the baby bonnet does little to soften the reality that as soon as she is old enough to walk, she will most likely work here. In another photo, two miners walk with shovels over their shoulders. Below them, in the bottom of a deep pit, a man looks up. All we can see is the man's hat and a bit of his sharp, thin nose. He has effectively buried himself (Mukwazhi "Zimbabwe").

Diamonds were discovered in Marange, Zimbabwe, in 2001 (“Diamond Mining”). It is now the largest diamond-producing project in the world. An estimated 13% of the world’s rough diamonds come from these pits, and year after President Mugabe launched an attack on illegal miners and smugglers, commanding the Air Force of Zimbabwe to shoot 200 illegal miners from helicopters, the diamonds were no longer deemed conflict-free. The diamond mining is also polluting the Save River and causing harm to villagers downstream (“Save River”). Since the mining began, there has been an increase in cervical cancer among women, thousands of cattle have died after suffering from stillbirths, and fish in the rivers have vanished (“Save River”; “1000 Cattle”). Mukwazhi hopes that his photographs of “the exploration of minerals and what this means to planet earth and... surrounding communities” serve as “an eye-opener, an opportunity for people to take action so that planet earth is not wiped in the next few years to come” (Mukwazhi n.p.).

Like in *Zimbabwe Diamond Mining*, in many of Mukwazhi’s shots in his *Angola Granite Mining* series, babies are slung to workers’ backs. Some sleep, others observe. In one image a baby’s feet stick out from under a man’s arm. The man’s shovel (clasped in one hand) crosses his body diagonally. There is also an intimate shot of children resting under a makeshift tent structure. Four sticks have been tee-peed and draped with a red blanket to shade these toddlers from the sun. One drinks from a white tin cup enameled with colorful flowers or fruits; another sleeps without pants, young enough to still be wetting himself, and a third peers out from the darkened tent interior. In the distance is a rock cliff. Figures work there. In another shot, what appear to be four three-year-olds walking with rocks on top of their heads; one struggles under the load, head tilted. In still another shot, three figures of varying ages, the youngest perhaps eight-years-old, carry tubs of gravel on their heads. Below them, a dog skirts the cliff side and someone with a baby tied to his or her back sits smashing the rock into gravel-sized bits. The rock floor is pocketed by pickaxes and shovels, and dotted with buckets, tools, and discarded clothes (Mukwazhi “Angola” n.p.).

In this series, Mukwazhi carefully introduces the viewer to all facets of this work. In one photo of a man holding a crushing tool, the viewer sees the gravel, the blue inseam of the man’s pant leg, and learns of the labor involved in crushing granite by hand. Then there is the sifting—a woman holds a red plastic dish strainer to separate dust and rubble from gravel-sized rock. Her skirted legs, the red interior lining of her slit skirt, her bare feet, and the African cloth on the rock behind her, stand out against dust and bits of rock. In several nonhuman-centered photographs, Mukwazhi juxtaposes the beauty of the relatively untouched land surrounding the mine against the geometric precision that renders the mined landscape ubiquitous, and against the diamond blades that saw large granite slabs into slices as water spits, cooling the saw blade (Mukwazhi “Angola”).

Dust emission, air pollution, ground vibration, emission of noxious gases, land degradation, swamp creation, deterioration of ground water, and erosion of soil are common side effects of granite mining. Those living near the mines and those working at them suffer both psychological and health problems, including shock, nasal infection, asthma, coughing, catarrh and sinusitis. Dust from granite quarrying contains 71 percent silica, and inhaling such dust can cause silicosis, a disease that can seriously disable and ultimately kill. The general non-use of protective equipment predisposes workers and those living near quarries to silicosis and pneumoconiosis. There are calls for compliance monitoring and for companies to be mandated “to adopt modern technology of dust strapping such that a negligible quantity of dust escapes from the various operations at quarry site” (Olusegun 5). However, such protections are not yet in place and low socio-economic status makes relocation impossible for those suffering from their

proximity to these mines. Ultimately, Mukwazhi's photographs of the diamond mining in Zimbabwe and the granite mining in Angola paint a picture of an endangered landscape and people polluted by mining.

### **L'Enfer du Cuivre (The Hell of Copper)**

Burkina Faso-born Nyaba Leon Ouedraogo was shortlisted for the Prix Pictet, an international award for photography and sustainability, for his series *L'Enfer du Cuivre (The Hell of Copper)*. The series depicts the 20-acre Aglobloshie dump in Accra, Ghana, one of the main dumping grounds for e-waste from Europe and the U.S., and "among the top ten most toxic sites in the world" (Daum n.p.). Ghanaians living in Europe and the United States collect used computers and send them by boat to Ghana's port of Tema, and then by road to Accra, where buyers purchase them. Other African nations also send shipments that end up in Accra. Ghanaian migrants then take the e-waste apart and burn components to get at the copper, which they then sell. Ghana's e-waste activities generate \$105–268 million annually and sustain at least 200,000 people nationwide, and the Agboglobloshie dump provides opportunities to approximately 4500–6000 workers and perhaps another 1500 indirectly (Daum n.p.).

In Ouedraogo's photo of three boys perched atop old computer monitors watching a pick up soccer game, the closeness of the boys' bodies as they make themselves at home on repurposed perches appears tender. In another photograph, cables cast surreal shadows across a worker's face as building clouds to his right mimic the tangle of cables on his head (Ouedraogo "Hell" n.p.). Ouedraogo states that while photographing this series he "wanted to be as precise as possible" as what the photographs transmit is the information that "thousands of used computers have dramatic consequences for the environment and the health of the workers." He adds, "Now people must understand the injustices and the sad environmental and human consequences of our global electronic economy" (Ouedraogo n.p.). The e-waste scavengers here pictured wear neither masks nor gloves and are thereby exposed to lead, mercury, cadmium, chromium, and chlorofluorocarbons, to name just a few dangerous materials (Ouedraogo "Hell"). Airborne chemicals, writes Kurt Daum, "most notably polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs) are leaching into bodily tissues of workers and innocent civilians, as well as into the air, soil, and water of nearby communities" (Daum n.p.). "I don't know how long it will take," Ouedraogo says, "but I want the world to find another way for this [e-waste] work to be done without people getting sick." In an interview with Sarah Phillips, he describes visiting the dump, not being able to see the horizon for the thick acrid smoke, and being told by the "kids working there" that they "suffered from headaches every evening, while others had more serious respiratory or digestive problems" (Phillips).

Ouedraogo's favorite photograph in *The Hell of Copper* series is of a man named Yaw. He took it the day after Yaw's little brother died. Yaw said that his brother "had gone home one day after work and died in his sleep. He hadn't been able to find out why because he might lose his job if he asked too many questions" (Phillips). In the photograph, Yaw stands upon a burning pile of refuse, his body seemingly elsewhere. He's looking down, jaw set, arm back, ready to throw something else onto the fire. The nobility of this shot is found in the subject's otherworldly contemplation. There isn't a "here" here—the smoke swallows the landscape and half erases Yaw's bandaged right arm (Ouedraogo "Hell").

Ouedraogo describes his work as a form of "photographic poetry" that is "rooted in an African aesthetic" and is about "taking pictures in an African way" as an African person. If, as Ouedraogo claims, "In Africa suffering is a source of misery, but also a form of survival," then it

makes sense that his images convey not just the shock of the misery of these e-waste recyclers, but also their stalwartness in the face of tremendous challenges (Ouedraogo “In Africa” n.p.).

### **The Profit Corner**

In *The Profit Corner*, Macilau documents the daily life of e-recyclers at Mozambique’s Hulene Dump so as to confront “consumers with the consequences of their voracious appetite for new electronic devices” (Macilau “The Profit” n.p.). In one photograph, a man in jumpsuit, ski mask, and goggles, stands atop a lake of burning trash, his hands—the only visible skin we see—bare, his suit darkened by soot. Behind him, others converge around the flames (Macilau “Mozambique”). In another shot, someone in trench coat and cloth hat holds a recycled lamp. The globe is missing. A boy appears as if on TV, for the viewer cannot readily see that the screen is missing and the boy’s body hidden by the e-waste mound on which the dismantled set rests. But, upon closer look, one sees how the smoke clouds float seamlessly through what appears to be the televised image of the boy worker’s impish face and then across sky above the dump (Macilau “The Profit”).

Macilau seeks, he says, “to represent the complex reality of the globalised labour market,” as well as his “experience [of] human greed, seeing the weakest generate the wealth of the strongest, with human misery as their unique compensation” (Macilau “Aging” n.p.). Macilau focuses his camera on those ordinary people who do not have “a voice” in society, as he wants “to hear those people no one wants to hear.” He also wants “to continue doing something for them” (Macilau “Fragment” n.p.). He considers himself a documentary photographer, believing that his work brings out the “dignity and values” of his subjects. He tries, he states, “to capture their existence: the adversity of their environments, the endurance of their young but possibly condemned bodies, and the resilience that, daily, defies the inhumanity of their hardships” (Macilau “Aging”). Macilau is more than aware that globalization in Mozambique favors economics over human development, which has, in effect eradicated the middle class. Francois Verster, in fact, argues that Macilau’s “pictures aim to confront this gap” between rich and poor. His gaze, Verster posits, “is an ‘African gaze’ which resists stereotypes and inhabits the world of its subjects; a gaze balancing direct social action with the mysterious possibilities offered by art” (Verster n.p.). Macilau hopes his photographs help people become more informed. He sees photography as a means of social intervention and insists that his work is “not just about Africa but about the world: too much capitalism and injustice.” It is through photography, he adds, “that people learn something about realities that they had never even imagined” (Macilau “Fragments”).

### **Pêcheurs de Nuit (Night Fishermen)**

Who are these three men painted by torch light, faces etched with worry? Of what do they speak, as they gather over the fire, drink tea, smoke? The night accentuates their colossal task (Barry “Pêcheurs”). The men are bound by the hazards of their occupation; they are fishermen on the edge of Lake Chad, once one of Africa’s largest lakes. The lake has shrunk by 90 percent over the past 60 years as a result of overuse of water, drought and the impacts of climate change. Nevertheless, it still offers a lifeline to nearly 40 million people (“The Tale”). By photographing Lake Chad’s fishermen at night, accompanying the fishermen nightly in their dugouts and shooting only with the available light provided by their headlamps, Barry says he wishes to “immortalize...dignified people who live in a state of complete vulnerability” and to “testify to the fishermen’s fragile existence and the threat weighing on their lives” (Barry “Through” n.p.).



Barry's interest in photographing fishermen on Lake Chad has to do with not only the plight of the fishermen, but also with the plight of the lake. Barry says that his *Pêcheurs de Nuit* photos are "an appeal to the need to save and preserve this natural environment, an essential freshwater reserve for [his]...country, Chad, and for all the countries of the African continent." Barry's passion for photography and the problems that need to be shown are so great, he says, that he cannot wait until he's made it financially before taking on his "share of responsibility," which means that he currently supports his own artistic photography career that he perceives is activist in nature. Barry plans to return to Lake Chad during the dry season, so as to see the "environment in all its dimensions" (Barry "Through" n.p.).

## Conclusion

By photographically framing the dignified human living amidst environmental degradation, Osodi's "Delta Nigeria: The Rape of Paradise," Mukwazhi's "Zimbabwe Diamond Mining" and "Angola Granite Mining," Ouedraogo's "L'Enfer du Cuivre" ("Hell of Copper"), Macilau's "The Profit Corner," and Barry's "Pêcheurs de nuit" ("Night Fishermen"), implicate the privileged viewer, in part blaming him or her (as well as systems of neo-colonisation and globalization) for their excessive consumption of resources that have brought about grave environmental situations (and in some cases even genocide—as Ken Saro-Wiwa termed the environmental war upon the Ogoni peoples in the Niger Delta) faced by many black Africans. These black African photographers eschew the "toxic sublime," and their documentary photography depicts subjects who level their gaze effectively, piercing the armor of the "small, educated population living in the rich part of the world" who are used to seeing photographs of environmental and human disaster as spectacles, and the images serve as a rallying cry, a "green" protest for those—privileged or otherwise—who look toward social documentary photography as a call to action (Sontag n.p.). In this way, the aforementioned photographic series (complete with accompanying titles and essays) by black Africans at the 9<sup>th</sup> Recontres de Bamako festival together, bespeak an activist agenda and potentially—given an empathetic, seriously engaged viewer who refuses to give into the privileged amnesia of compassion fatigue and environmental melancholia—serve as catalysts for environmental change (at the same time as they demand an end to both ecocide and corresponding genocide). Perhaps, we can also look forward—without losing the empathetic triggers that a human centered focus brings to environmental photographs—to the integration of more elements of African cosmological nonhuman and human interrelation within black African environmental photography.

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