Enacting Gaia and Slow Violence in Fabrice Monteiro’s The Prophecy Series

By Isadora Italia

“To prophecy today it is only necessary to know men as they are throughout the whole world in all their inequality.” - John Berger (1967)

Introduction

Belgian-Beninese, Dakar-based photographer Fabrice Monteiro began his photography project The Prophecy in order to address environmental and ecological concerns in Senegal (figs.1-9). The nine-photo series depicts majestic female figures wearing elaborate costumes made from upcycled trash designed by Senegalese stylist Jah Gal. The female figures are djinns, animistic spirits present in West African culture, who have been sent to Earth by Gaia (their mother) to warn humans and empower them to change their destructive ways. In this essay, I will explore Monteiro’s deployment of Gaia as his organizing framework through the lens of Bruno Latour’s work. I will also apply Imre Szeman’s conception of the “eco-apocalypse” narrative and Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence” to the series as I consider the photographs’ implications of the fast fashion industry and today’s culture of disposability. Lastly, I will discuss the tension between the series’ grassroots beginnings and its current international fame, and how that affects its message and impact on a local and global scale.

The Prophecy Series

Monteiro began the series in 2013 “to motivate an ecological consciousness in the upcoming generation,” originally imagining it as a tale that would be distributed to Senegalese

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schoolchildren. He says the photos were “inspired by nine ecological plagues in Senegal” including pollution, coastal erosion, illegal fishing, slash-and-burn agriculture, and waste. The photos are set against ravaged coasts, beach shores, and waste dumps; the costumes worn by the *djinns* are made of materials ranging from sand, fishing nets, plastic waste, and tree bark, and refer to the specific issue at stake in each photo. Monteiro says: “*The Prophecy* is a tale of hope and empowerment. Earth has sent her spirits to tell humans that they have the power to reverse what they have done to the planet.” The photos, at once beautiful and haunting, are meant to ultimately inspire hope.

The series was funded through a cooperative agreement with Ecofund, a nonprofit association based in Germany that hosts crowdfunding campaigns for vetted ecological projects around the world. During the two years that Monteiro and Jah Gal worked on the series, people could donate to the project online and learn more about the environmental issues being photographed through educational blog posts. The highest donor in each photo campaign would receive a print. It is worth noting that while working on this series, Monteiro extended the project to Australia and produced images centering on the Great Barrier Reef, but this essay will focus only on the original Senegalese suite.

**Gaia as the Organizing Framework**

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Monteiro speaks about his use of Gaia as the organizing framework for his series, saying: “Gaia, the mother earth, [is] exhausted by her incapacity to maintain the natural cycles of the planet in front of new modes of life and consumption. She resolves to send her djinns [children], to let them appear to the humans and deliver a message of warning and empowerment.”

His description of Gaia echoes James Lovelock’s Gaia Theory. A British scientist and inventor, Lovelock developed a theory in the 1960s suggesting that Earth’s organic and inorganic components evolved together, making it a singular, self-regulating system able to maintain its own habitability. However, in Monteiro’s narrative, Gaia is exhausted. She can no longer cope with humanity’s collective destruction and sends her djinns in a redemptive effort. Monteiro invokes the tradition of djinns because of the strong West African belief in animism and spirits. He believes many NGOs working in Africa are ineffective because they fail to consider local culture and instead arrive with pre-fabricated ideas and campaigns that do not resonate with the local populace. Monteiro mixes art with the local culture in order to imbue his work with a powerful narrative message.

This deployment of Gaia calls to mind Bruno Latour’s 2011 lecture “Waiting for Gaia. Composing the Common World Through Arts and Politics,” in which he wrestles with how, in the age of the Anthropocene, we can begin to reckon with “our gigantic actions as humans. . . and, on the other side, our complete lack of a grasp on what we have collectively done[.]”

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5 Jamshed, “‘The Prophecy’: Photographer Captures Terrifying Vision of Future.”
Latour begins with the idea that the disconnect between humans and nature has existed since at least the 19th century, when the spectacle of “nature” was valorized as the “sublime” in poems, sermons, and other art forms. Humans felt at once awestruck by nature’s beauty and overwhelmed by her ability to inflict violence. Now, though, the tides have turned. With the arrival of the Anthropocene, humans now must grapple with the feeling of responsibility “for the quick and irreversible changes of the Earth’s face occasioned in part as a result of the tremendous power we are expending[.]”

9 Latour asks: how can that feeling of responsibility really take hold when there is no single individual, or even single action, responsible for the Earth’s looming demise? It is collective action, large and complex, that could lead to irreversible and incomprehensible disaster. How do we, as individuals, comprehend and address this reality?

Monteiro’s invocation of Gaia is at its core an attempt to instill a feeling of responsibility in viewers. He connects the nine disasters through the central figure of Gaia so viewers can consider the seemingly disparate ecological concerns as examples of a larger truth: as a collective, humans are threatening Gaia in multiple ways. By sending her children to humanity, Gaia is asking us to nurture her. As Latour writes and Monteiro conveys through his art, even though we threaten her, she encompasses us; “We have nowhere else to go.”

10 Perhaps Latour is right: humans can no longer access the sublime, as it was once envisioned, because we know that we are the ones inflicting violence on nature. But Monteiro’s majestic figures are arguably an embodiment of Latour’s newly complicated idea of the “sublime”: the djinns elicit a sense of awe and wonder. They animate new thinking when the viewer realizes that we are seeing waste and pollution of our own making. When we look at Monteiro’s figures, we see the shocking

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effect we are having on Gaia embodied. This closer look generates guilt and the realization that we are the makers of our potential demise. Could these figures be an answer to Latour’s question: “How to feel the sublime when guilt is gnawing at your guts?”

Monteiro believes that numbers, statistics, or pictures of devastated landscapes are not enough to spark change, and that art is one of the most effective means of expressing concern and hope. Art speaks to the heart, and imbuing the issues with “a mystical element helps with awareness, and pushes people to change—and change now.” And though Latour warns us against hope when he cites Clive Hamilton’s assertion that it breeds melancholia, Monteiro’s art opens space for imaginative possibilities and, ultimately, empowerment.

**Dystopia Now**

Though there is a sense of hope that collective action can lead to change in *The Prophecy*, it is not a utopia. Monteiro believes that “we already live in a dystopian world.” In an interview with “The Stream” on Al Jazeera, Monteiro calls attention to the dystopian reality of living in a world facing a global environmental crisis while nations become more and more ego-centric in the search for progress and profit. His hyperlocal photos are enveloped in the larger, global issue of climate change, prompting further reflection on the complex politics and systems that have created today’s reality.

Imre Szeman’s article “System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster” outlines three dominant narratives in circulation today that concern our global reliance on oil and

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13Jamshed, “‘The Prophecy’: Photographer Captures Terrifying Vision of Future.”
its impending disappearance (“disaster of oil”). Of the three narratives—strategic realism, techno-utopianism, and eco-apocalypse—Monteiro’s work takes the eco-apocalypse approach, which “understands itself as a pedagogic one, a genre of disaster designed to modify behavior and transform the social.” This narrative approach is substantiated by Monteiro’s claim that the primary goal of his photographic series is to inspire change through local action, particularly among younger generations. As the name implies, the eco-apocalypse narrative predicts a grim future ahead and understands that the disaster of oil cannot be addressed without social and political change, but since that change seems distant and improbable, “it sees the future as Bosch-like—a hell on earth, obscured by a choking carbon dioxide smog.” The faces of Monteiro’s savior figures are haunting; wrapped in plastic, they are already suffocating in a future “hell on earth” reality.

*The Prophecy* photo listed as fig. 2 is almost a visual conjuring of Szeman’s eco-apocalypse. A *djinni* rises from the ocean wearing a suit made of black trash bags. She is part female, part fish. Her right arm resembles a fin and her left sleeve is embellished with shells, a symbol of her home environment. She grips a dead bird in her left hand; feathers adorn the torso and neckline of her suit. This blended imagery of plastic, fish, and birds speaks to the ongoing destructive cycle of plastic entering the oceans, affecting fish, and killing predatory birds. The photo was taken in the islands of Madeleine off the coast of Dakar, a protected marine area where a Spanish Fishing Boat ran aground a few years ago while carrying 100,000 gallons of fuel on board. While Senegalese authorities were able to prevent a major catastrophe at the time by

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collecting the fuel, the image serves as a symbol of environmental disasters worldwide caused by oil spills.

As Szeman alludes to in his essay, society is caught in a double bind. Oil has negative effects on the environment through pollution, oil spills, depletion of fossil fuels, and fracking. Byproducts of oil like plastic become waste and pollute the Earth. Yet, the neoliberal order depends on oil. Countries use its economic power to grow and develop. Though the possibility of running out of oil spells disaster, we depend on it. Yet, there is something about Monteiro’s image that is almost still, tranquil. The water is quiet; the horizon extends calmly. What might the endless horizon mean? Could it symbolize what influential Norwegian mathematician and sociologist Johan Galtung termed ‘indirect or structural violence,’ which he insists “is silent, it does not show—it is essentially static, it is the tranquil waters”?\(^{20}\)

**Slow Violence**

In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon draws upon Galtung’s term to coin his own concept of “slow violence,” which he defines as “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.”\(^{21}\) His 2011 book begins with a shocking memo excerpt in which former World Bank President Lawrence Summers asks: “Shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries?”\(^{22}\) Nixon points to this as “global managerial reasoning,” meaning large transnational organizations consider some parts of the world more valuable and

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others more disposable, making decisions accordingly.\textsuperscript{23} In Nixon’s words, Summers links waste, something that is unsightly and harmful, to Africa, “an out-of-sight continent, a place remote from green activists’ terrain of concern.”\textsuperscript{24}

With this anecdote and global phenomenon in mind, we can approach another work in Monteiro’s series (fig.1). In the composition, we see a \textit{djinni} wearing a massive gown. She rises like a phoenix, smoke billowing behind her. Upon closer inspection, we see the gown is made of trash: plastic waste, snack bags, toys, a flip flop, aluminum cans. Faintly, in the background, is a greener landscape. It is hazy and barely legible. Are there bodies of water present? Or patches of rocky soil? Trees line the far horizon. The only presence of animal or human life is the bird at the top of the frame. The pile of trash she rises from overwhelms the natural (and possibly human) landscape.

This photo was taken in, and refers to, a specific dumpsite called Mbeubeuss that stretches over 400 acres, located about 18 miles from Dakar. According to Ecofund’s 2013 post, when Mbeubeuss was created in 1968, there was no thought of its eventual impact. As the site has grown, it has polluted the surrounding water, soil, and environment, jeopardizing economic activities like cattle breeding and agriculture.\textsuperscript{25} The post continues:

The following statistics show the health problems encountered by the inhabitants of Mbeubeuss:

Women and children living close to the dumpsite are 5 times more likely to suffer from anaemia and respiratory diseases.

- 40 \% of the women have obstetrical problems leading to miscarriages and stillbirths.

\textsuperscript{23}Nixon, \textit{Slow Violence}, 1.
\textsuperscript{24}Nixon, \textit{Slow Violence}, 2.
\textsuperscript{25}Ecofund, “The Prophecy, Senegal.”
- 75% of inhabitant water supply is contaminated with lead.
- 90% of the pork raised in the vicinity of the dumpsite is contaminated with mercury and should be declared unfit for consumption.26

The Ecofund post also explains that a population of about 1,800 work in the dump site, including pickers, trash dealers, and recyclers. At times, their monthly earnings even surpass the minimum wage in Senegal, but because of the stigma associated with their profession, they are marginalized by society.27 Despite recorded health hazards associated with working in and living near the dumpsite, it still provides work for a population with limited options.28

Though Monteiro’s aim is to point to a local problem in Senegal and ask the Senegalese and West Africans to think about their consumption and ability to affect change, this image encapsulates a larger, global problem. In Raymond Williams’ words, it “attend[s] to ‘the close living substance’ of the local while simultaneously tracing the ‘occluded relationships’—the vast transnational economic pressures, the labor and commodity dynamics—that invisibly shape the local.”29 Monteiro’s hyperlocal series functions as a portal to today’s reality: one’s daily living inextricably linked to the global economic order.

Fast Fashion and the Culture of Disposability

The images in this series are inarguably beautiful. At first glance, they appear to be high fashion photographs, a product of Monteiro’s previous career as a model. By making the ugly so beautiful, we are compelled to look at it and forced to confront the reality of our present-day conundrum. Yet, a question arises. Is there a paradox to using an haute couture aesthetic to call

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26 Ecofund, “The Prophecy, Senegal.”
27 Ecofund, “The Prophecy, Senegal.”
attention to issues of waste and pollution? Is fashion itself not a wasteful industry? The apparel industry accounts for 10% of global carbon emissions and is the second largest polluter, second to oil.\textsuperscript{30} Textile dying pollutes the water and often, textile workers in the global South are paid meager wages, working in appalling conditions.\textsuperscript{31} Retailers have been known to burn unsold stock instead of selling it cheaply to protect the brand’s exclusivity, at great cost to the environment.\textsuperscript{32} When natural fibers are buried in a landfill, they produce the greenhouse gas methane as they degrade.\textsuperscript{33}

Given this paradox, is it problematic to use the couture aesthetic in this case? The local Senegalese crises Monteiro is addressing point exactly to the problem of natural resources being sacrificed to consumerism and economic interests. Nixon talks about how the global North inflicts resource imperialism on the global South to maintain its “unsustainable consumer appetites” and outsources environmental devastation to maintain their own conservation ethic.\textsuperscript{34} Global managerial reasoning is an attempt to maintain the lifestyle and consumerist practices of rich countries despite inflicting ecological crises on the global South.\textsuperscript{35}

I argue that instead of weakening his claim, Monteiro’s employment of the couture aesthetic is effective precisely because it allows for an image to be beautiful while calling attention to and

\textsuperscript{34}Nixon, \textit{Slow Violence}, 22-23.
\textsuperscript{35}Nixon, \textit{Slow Violence}, 1-2.
criticizing our culture of disposability. As previously stated, Monteiro worked with Jah Gal to create costumes by upcycling trash into beautiful couture-inspired costumes. The costume skirt is made of trash (particularly plastic) and purposely organized by the time it takes the material to disintegrate as a didactic function. Couture aesthetic is a point of departure that calls our attention to habits of acquiring and consuming without consideration to the larger and longer lasting impact.

**From Local to International**

Monteiro began with a local intent. He photographed Senegalese locations to bring attention to local problems, using local beliefs of animism to reach Senegalese and West Africans communities. Additionally, the funding for this project was grassroots, financed through a cooperative agreement with Ecofund, which hosted a crowdfunding site that raised over €12,000 to support this project, exceeding the original goal of €10,000. Initial supporters of this grassroots movement shared a goal of creating awareness about the risks of (and solutions to) environmental degradation. As written on the Ecofund website:

> The making of each photo is a participatory and didactic process: each theme is introduced on the Ecofund’s multi-media web platform to the community and general public. Everyone can participate by liking the project, commenting on it or financing the production costs through bidding for THE PROPHECY photo. As you know, we want to raise awareness concerning environmental problems of cities like Dakar and propose solutions, in order to inspire the young generation for action.

But the series quickly gained international acclaim. A Google search of “Monteiro The Prophecy” will show articles from outlets like CNN, The Guardian, Hyperallergic, and more in around 2015, meaning word about the series was reaching a Western audience. When the series

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37Ecofund, “The Prophecy, Senegal.”
was being funded via Ecofund and the highest donor in each campaign was given a print, donations often ranged from €150-400. Now, the photos are selling for over €6,000. Various museums in the US have purchased and exhibited these works since. Now that the series exists in Western museums as revered art objects, have they lost their transformative power as didactic objects? The work of a grassroots organization such as Ecofund is to educate, agitate, and affect change. Does Monteiro’s photographic project lose its power in the often static and elitist environment of the Western art museum? Or is the series’ arrival in the Western consciousness a good thing? Can these works serve a double function of inspiring the next West African generation to think more critically about their environment, and inspire the next generation in the global North to rethink its impact on the greater world?

**Conclusion**

As demonstrated, the local specificity of Monteiro’s images does not detract from their relevance to global issues. *The Prophecy* photograph set on the island of Madeleine responds to a specific instance of a near oil spill but references these occurrences as an ongoing problem, encapsulating our global dependency on oil. *The Prophecy* photograph set in Mbeubeuss specifically references a Senegalese garbage dump, but speaks to a broader reality: the 50 largest dump sites around the world are disproportionately located in the global South, in countries such as Bolivia, Brazil, Ghana, Honduras, and India, for example. Slash-and-burn architecture (fig. 9) is also an issue in South Asia, among other places. Sometimes motivated by transnational company interests, this practice can lead to infertile soil and deforestation.38 The list goes on. By using Gaia as his

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organizing framework, drawing on the eco-apocalypse narrative structure, and calling attention to slow violence, Monteiro creates an imaginative framework to inspire local change and global awareness. As a transcultural half Beninese, half Belgian artist with Western training and an understanding of African culture, Monteiro finds a creative space that allows for transformation. Now it is up to us to take Gaia’s warning and act on this message of hope.


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