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Selly Raby Kane: Surrealist Designer and Social Innovator

By: Enrica Picarelli

Abstract: Selly Raby Kane is a renowned Senegalese fashion designer and artist involved in Africa's booming art and design movement. Kane is an interesting case study to grasp fashion's involvement in Africa's current debate surrounding identity and empowerment through innovation. This article discusses Kane's designs in light of her contribution not only to contemporary approaches to African fashion that emphasize individuality, but also to effecting change through fashion, examining the ways in which she mixes symbols, signs, and techniques of African and international cultures to inscribe Africa, and Senegal in particular, into the global fashionscape.

Keywords:

Selly Raby Kane
Afropolitanism
Senegal
African fashion
Surrealism

Introduction

Selly Raby Kane is a renowned Senegalese fashion designer and artist involved in Africa's booming art and design movement. She is the founder of the brand SRK and a member of the collectives *Muus du Tux* and *Les Petits Pierres*: the former is a group of artists that explore the connections between Dakar's urban life and mysticism across different mediums, and the latter is a multidisciplinary organization that promotes social innovation across the city's neighbourhoods, where Kane curates and participates in exhibitions.

Since emerging on the global scene in the early 2010s, Kane has quickly earned a following as an example of a new wave of designers who create cosmopolitan styles infused with African references. Her illustrative creations propose an unconventional interpretation of traditional dress styles from West Africa that incorporate futuristic elements and a focus on sustainability. Kane is an interesting case study to grasp fashion's involvement in Africa's current debate surrounding identity and empowerment through innovation. In particular, her style conflates a focus on "home" — Dakar's status as a major, but generally overlooked, global fashion hub — and an Afrofuturist attention towards metamorphosis and change. The outcome is a type of fashion avant-gardism that foregrounds positionality and the desire to anchor the designs to their African environment, which Kane conceives of as representative of Senegal's prominent place in world fashion.

This article discusses Kane's design in light of her contribution not only to contemporary approaches to African fashion that emphasize individuality, but to effecting change through fashion, examining the ways in which she mixes symbols, signs, and techniques of African and international cultures to inscribe Africa, and Senegal in particular, into the global fashionscape.

Avant-Garde Designs for Afropolitan Fashion Connoisseurs

Selly Raby Kane is best described as a polymathic artist whose eclectic aesthetic crosses over from fashion to other creative realms that include architecture, fiction, and directing. In the years since launching the clothing line “Seraka,” later abbreviated to SRK, Kane has released six collections that she describes as “future pop art” for “young afropolitans across the continent” (*Selly Raby Kane*). This highly-mobile and affluent demographic of cosmopolitan Africans (Selasi, 2005; Eze, 2017) with which she identifies are her ambassadors outside of the continent, where her work is shaping a visual identity of African-ness predicated on stylishness and cool. This section provides a visual analysis of SRK’s fashion lines, which utilize an interplay of African and Western style components to effect semantic transformations that explode essentialist notions of identity and belonging.

Kane’s approach to fashion as a means to claim a cosmopolitan African identity is influenced by her personal experience living abroad. She was born in Dakar where she was an activist for children’s rights from the age of eight to seventeen, working as a reporter for Radio Guneyi, and completed her high school studies before moving to France to study Business Administration and Law. She then returned to Senegal in 2009 and has since been traveling back and forth from the U.S., where she established an atelier and, in 2015, was one of the recipients of the Mandela Washington Fellowship. In 2018, she opened her first store in Dakar’s Sacré Cœur III district. These years away from Senegal were instrumental to her career in fashion: in Paris she quit Law school to enrol at Mod’Spe school of fashion and work on her first line, which she launched in 2008. Today she is one of Senegal’s most appreciated designers in her home country and abroad. Her characteristic style, mixing traditional and contemporary cuts, targets a diverse international clientele that includes celebrities like Les Nubians, Flavia Matatta, and Beyoncé Knowles, as well as middle-class customers from Senegal, Italy, France, and the U.S. Indeed, she is determined to make at least some of her creations affordable to a larger demographic. Her boutique in Dakar, opened in December 2017, always has a sales section where customers can purchase discounted items and accessories at prices ranging between 12,000 and 50,000 CFA (\$20 to \$90 USD, approximately).

Kane's goal has always been to create styles that would reference Dakar's "incomparable visual identity" (Gérard, 2018) and give shape to a speculative universe populated by fantastic creatures.¹ She credits this curiosity for the fantastic to her father, who introduced her to American science fiction and fantasy at a young age, inspiring a long-lasting interest in speculative narratives that bring to life "intangible and invisible things" (Bocoum, 2018). Indeed, Kane sees herself as a conjurer of strange and fantastic worlds where the unfamiliar becomes familiar and opposites come together in eccentric sartorial configurations. An adventurer and enthusiast for all things multicultural and underground (Sétanal, 2018), she designs surrealist garments that showcase an encounter between local and international influences, applying a creative lens to the Afropolitan notion of hybrid identities born out of "interweaving[s] of worlds ... forms and signs..." (Mbembe, 2007, p. 28).² SRK's Afropolitan designs are versions of the "Afro-fusion" style that since the late 1990s has presented contemporary variations on traditional African fashion (Farber, 2010, p. 141), putting designers from the continent and the diaspora into conversation with global trends and demands of innovation. This style characteristically remixes opposite sources of inspiration and bypasses categories such as "African" and "traditional" to emphasize individualism and authenticity (Rovine, 2015). Fashion scholar Leora Farber (2010, p. 142) applies this label to three popular South African brands — *Stoned Cherrie*, *Strangelove*, and *Sun Goddess* — whose lines balancing African and international components "present examples of cohesive fusion between cultural signifiers" and new interpretations of specific South African influences. These components include application techniques of cutting and stitching, visual referents like traditional prints, and decorative ethnic elements like beadwork, buttons, shells, and braids. Similar cross-overs mark the designs of a host of other labels, such as Christie Brown (Ghana), Maki Oh (Nigeria), IAMISIGO (Nigeria), Kepha Maina (Kenya), Duro Olowu (Nigeria/UK), and Loza Maléombho (Ivory Coast/Brazil) (Figure 1 and Figure 2). These new interpretations of local dress codes, sampled by a growing international audience, are credited for making strides towards global visibility and heralding the era of "Africanism" (Boateng, 2018). Ghanaian designer Ozwald Boateng coined this term in the aftermath of Arise Fashion Week 2018 held in Lagos, Nigeria to describe the current fashion phase where international trends are Africanized and African tastes are internationalized (Pool, 2016; Jennings, 2015), resulting in enhanced visibility and, to a lesser extent, revenues for local players. Beyond the emphasis on trends, scalability, and market value, Afro-fusion envisions a "globalized conception of identity" (Rovine, 2015, p. 248) that mobilizes garments and sartorial performances to broadcast a distinct aesthetic of African modernity aimed predominantly at an upper-middle class of fashion-conscious customers from the continent and abroad.

¹ All translations from French are mine.

² Occasionally critiqued for its commercialism (Dabiri, 2017), Afropolitanism refers to a movement that takes stock of the long history of contamination that shaped African modernity, rejecting essentialist views rooted in geography for a relational view of identity (Eze, 2017). With hybridity as its keyword, the Afrosartorial aesthetic downplays origin and emphasizes contamination, the generative power of unexpected encounters, and the idea of identity as an ongoing cultural project.



Figure 1: IAMISIGO, "Gods of the Wilderness" SS19.



Figure 2: Loza Maléombho, "Queen Pokou" AW16.

Kane's designs emphasize cross-cultural contact and radical individualism. Her collections are mash-ups of cultural influences, styling techniques, and visual signs that she picks from sources spanning American pulp fiction, B-movies, Japanese fashion, Senegalese embroidery, and entomology. The outcome is an expressive cacophony that alludes to Kane's fascination with the mystical and the fantastic, while appealing to the "street" taste of sophisticated urban dwellers. The 2012 Fall/Winter "Iconic Capsule" collection sets the tone of this aesthetic with a line inspired by arcade-game subculture. The blouses and sheath dresses feature openwork detailing that accentuates the body with geometric inserts of PVC, fake hair, and leather. Black, white, and bright hues of gold, red, and green are positioned together to highlight contrast and bold variations, creating a chromatic palette that evokes that of comic strips (Figure 3). The angular cut-outs and moulded forms realized with traditional batik designs and deconstructed *boubous*³ build up the wearer's figure in the fashion of modern superhero uniforms. These are outfits for fashion-forward individuals who do not mind switching the loose-fitting robes and dresses that are traditionally worn across West Africa for shapely garments that are made to look like science fiction costumes (Figure 4).

³ "The boubou itself is the classic Senegalese robe, made of a three-meter-long rectangle with a neck opening; it is sewn up the sides to make armholes, and draped over the body" (Rabine 2002, p. 30).



Figure 4: SRK, "Iconic Capsule" FW2012.

Figure 3: FSRK, "Iconic Capsule" FW2012.



"Sahel Under Waves" (Autumn/Winter 2016) is less exaggerated and humorous than "Iconic Capsule," but equally driven by a desire to stir up the imagination with futuristic designs — in Kane's words, "reconnecting with one's inner architecture which involves childhood [and] playfulness" (*Sahel Under the Waves*). The garments are realized with a mix-and-match of fabrics that include varieties of Senegalese *bazin*, wax, and synthetic fur in contrasting hues of black, salmon pink, gold, and blue-green. SRK's signature high-relief embroidery and luxurious quilting feature prominently to, again, infuse a dream-like quality into the collection. These techniques and the prominent use of *bazin*, the shiny damask cotton cloth largely used in Senegalese dress, add a recognizable African imprint to the designs, testifying to Kane's strong desire to anchor her work in local culture. Rovine (2015) describes *bazin*, or *basagn* in Wolof, as "an iconic element of local dress that, once adorned by local dyers and embroiderers" with a variety of techniques, is "*de rigueur* for men and women at weddings, baptisms, official state events and celebrations of all kinds" (p. 127-8). The embroideries further enhance the value of *bazin*-made garments and, by extent, the status and reputation of their wearers. Kelly Kirby notes that the wear and display of heavily adorned and embroidered styles, particularly dresses made of high-quality damask (*riche bazin*), relates to sociality, with the colour and embroidery of the motif "stand[ing] out as indices of innovative style" (2013, p. 68). In Senegal embroidered garments made with *bazin*, most often *boubous*, convey the notion of *sañse* — the Wolof word for fashionability.

The SRK embroideries, made locally, reproduce fantastic motifs unlike anything that is found on traditional Senegalese garments. A school of yellow shrimp float behind the long fringes that adorn the front of a *bazin* jade-green slim dress with irregular hem, and electric blue horses gallop across the lower part of a mini skirt of shiny damask cloth. We have also clusters of jagged leaves or sponges fanning out across the back of the bomber jacket that is paired with the skirt. These and other motifs such as flies, rockets, diamonds, tropical plants, and sea mammals are the most distinctive signs of Kane's aesthetic, forming a bestiary that reflects her fascination with what she calls "cultural bubbling" — the overload of information and visual stimuli that she gets from constant traveling and research (Gérard, 2018). Some of these motifs are also borrowed from West African dress, with notable examples including the speed bird and the fan. "Dakar City of Birds," her breakthrough collection from 2015, features appliqués with the so-called "speed bird" enclosed in a white oval (Figure 5). In 2016 Beyoncé was photographed wearing an outfit of SRK black panelled *haori*⁴ and pencil skirt, the former featuring an assortment of appliqués reproducing speed birds next to sea shrimps, parrots, and flowers (Figure 6). Designs with the speed bird adorn several popular printed cloths sold in West Africa. Christopher Spring (2012, p. 82) writes that this symbol is one of the earliest printed on wax cloth that was created especially for sale in the continent (Figure 7). Traditionally, the symbols reproduced on the fabrics worn across the continent have socio-cultural meaning. Known as *Sika wo ntaban* ("Money has wings") in Ghana, a reference to volatile fortune (Spring, 2012), in Senegal the speed bird symbolizes the women selling chicks-for-wishes on the streets (O'Mahony, 2018).

⁴ The *haori* is a Japanese loose-fitting, T-shaped robe, worn by men and women, that is cut like a kimono but is shorter and is fastened at the center.



Figure 5: SRK, "Dakar City of Birds" FW2015.

Figure 6: Beyoncé in a haori and pencil skirt ensemble by SRK



Figure 7: The “speed bird” design

SRK’s second signature insignia is the fan. We find it embroidered on the front of a quilted bomber jacket in gold and salmon, paired with a golden quilted midi-skirt with a decorated hem included in the collection “Sahel Under Waves.” Like the speed bird, the fan is well-known to African fashion leaders again because it is reproduced on a range of printed cloths sold across West Africa. Notably, the Dutch manufacturing company Vlisco, the main purveyor of sartorial glamour in the region (Sylvanus, 2007), has realized several types of fan patterns, the top-selling being one made of wax *hollandais*⁵ in a palette of red and grey. Vlisco provides some background on this design that has been recently re-issued within the “Classics” collection: “Fans were once the only way to cool down in the warm African climate, and in Nigeria, market vendors with electric fans enjoyed a certain status. In Nigeria, where it’s known as ‘Table Fan,’ the design is popular in traditional Igbo colours. Today this Vlisco original has become a favourite in many countries” (*Table Fan*). While referencing the surface decoration of Vlisco’s serialized designs, Kane’s collages of iconic symbols of African dress also depart from tradition to, once again, escape from clichés. By removing these designs from the repetitive series in which they feature and embroidering/appliqueing them onto the garments next to other insignia, the designer produces a different kind of visual pleasure than the graphic repetition typical of most fabric designs in the region, one derived by foregrounding the playful act of taking apart, re-shuffling, and re-assembling the elements of her styles. Her collages are an interesting application of the surrealist process of *détournement* to fashion design. The surrealists created fragmentary units made of re-ordered elements that, in their new associations, produced new configurations of meaning (Adamowicz, 1998). In a Facebook post, dated 6 February 2018, Kane invited her readers to “think of garments and accessories in abstraction of their primary functions. Don’t be a prisoner of their intended functions. You are the master of the pieces and the material, you can transform, detour, displace, revisit as you please” (Raby Kane, 2018). The collages abstract the signs from their traditional context, setting them in motion and proposing new interpretations of cultural influences. They also highlight Kane’s commitment to reshaping African sartorial tradition according to her personal vision of cosmopolitanism infused with fantastic and futuristic influences. Kane obtains the same effect with the combination of stylings exemplified by the outfit sampled by Beyoncé; sported by an African-American celebrity who has become the icon of a global Black movement, the outfit with the *haori* and pencil skirt is representative of the process of cultural fusion and re-signification discussed by Farber in relation to contemporary African fashion. The interplay of Western and Eastern stylings, namely the hip-hugging skirt and loose-fitting dressing gown, displace and reframe traditional dress codes and the West African preference for loose designs, inventing a hybrid style of playful glamor.⁶

⁵ Wax *hollandais* is a wax fabric made of super-soft cotton and printed on both sides with a palette of two core colours, one of which is used to highlight a “bubbling effect.” See <https://shop.vlisco.com/en/wax-hollandais>.

⁶ Here I draw from Farber’s “cautious distinction between (Western) tailored dress and (Africanised) loose-fitting or more generous, less structured garments” (2007, p. 133).

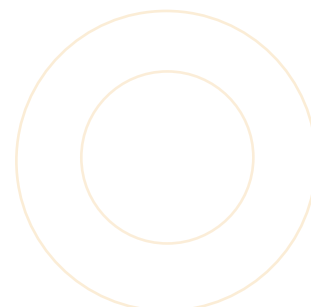
Kane is here following and updating the tradition of mixing different, sometimes contrasting elements and styles that has a long history in Senegalese dress culture. Several scholars highlight this practice. Johanna Grabski (2009, p. 231) describes Dakar as “a hybrid space [...] epitomizing the hybrid aesthetic of urban Africa”. In a chapter based on her interviews with Dakarois tailors and designers, she notes that “the interaction between international and local sphere” (Grabski 2010, p. 33) is the most significant influence on street culture in the country, as these two worlds come together in a sartorial approach that adapts and remakes international trends and styles according to local taste. Leslie Rabine (2002, p. 28) writes about the rich aesthetic effect and visual pleasure that she experienced while conducting fieldwork in the Senegalese capital in the 1990s: “a sea of sartorial opulence where currents and eddies swirled in layerings and overlapping of styles, fabrics, dyeing techniques and embroidery designs from different moments in Senegalese history”. A similar encounter between local resources and cosmopolitan styles is also found in *haute couture* fashion. Grabski (2009, p. 231) gives the example of the French-born, Senegalese conceptual designer Claire Kane whose unisex creations, made with locally woven cotton, sport elements that “are identified with both European and Senegalese fashion,” creating a style that is “at once tailored and elegant yet urban and hip.”

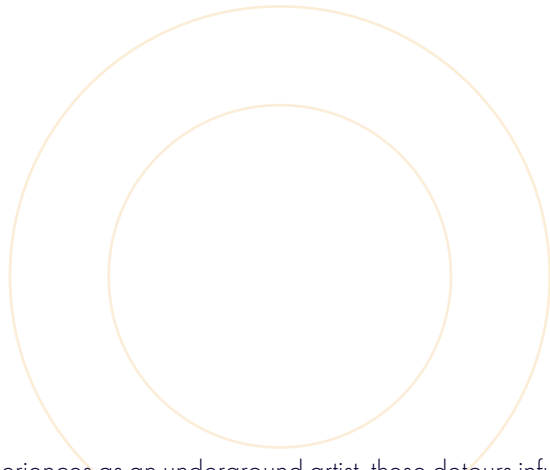
The examples given in this section show Selly Raby Kane’s idea of cultural remixing, as they fuse diverse application techniques, fabrics, stylistic elements and visual cues to perform a cosmopolitan identity while foregrounding their Senegalese origin. Significantly, Kane describes her clothing lines as an “origami of cultures,” (Les Petites Pierres, 2013) emphasizing that her playful collages establish new connections between known and obscure cultural histories. For example, she claims to be fascinated with cinema, Sufi mysticism, the natural sciences, Dakar’s urban archeology, as well as horror and science fiction (Alexandre, 2018). These references may be more or less visible at the individual level in her sartorial ranges, with the overall collage effect resulting in a cacophony that Kane says is inspired by the Wolof notion of *miaras*, or mixing, the approach also noted by Grabski and Rabine. In Kane’s case this opulence reflects her idea of the designer as a cultural mediator who integrates African and cosmopolitan aesthetics, resulting in the creation of layered dreamscapes (Design Indaba, 2016, p. 315) that create stories around combinations of signs, codes, and garments each carrying its own history and heritage. But, as we have seen, she is not the first or the only designer to experiment with tradition and international influences. This approach has been shaped as much by her personal history of traveling and being exposed to diverse, often conflicting, cultural influences, as by the dress culture she has grown up in. What makes her stand apart is a futuristic vision of Dakar, that also inspires a commitment to sustainability, social responsibility, and change.

The Dakar Connection

SRK's lines present innovative uses and meanings for elements of West African dress and international styling techniques. These collages outline a surrealist fashionscape that switches between aesthetic codes, high-end fashion and street style, Senegal and an unspecified "other" realm, blurring the line between reality and fiction. The shapely androgynous silhouettes, the redefinition of classic garments like the *boubou*, and the play of volumes, textures, and colours highlights an appetite for the cartoonish and transformative that is expressed on the wearer, whom Kane regards as an active participant in her escapist fantasy. In an interview for the magazine *Demain Dakar* she discusses her idea of fashion as storytelling where collections are treated like chapters of an ongoing narrative: "I start by inventing a story and sketching characters, to give body to the clothes and materialize the environment in which people are immersed" (Alexandre, 2018). Such stories add depth and meaning to the garments. **They also expose her fascination with Dakar's vernacular aesthetic, the unacknowledged form of spontaneous art-making that inspires her visionary style.**

Indeed, Kane's efforts are grounded in the goal of "transfus[ing] the myths of [her] country into [her] work" (Bocoum, 2018), broadcasting them to a global audience that remains largely ignorant of what the continent has to offer. This commitment to showing another Africa entails exploring and mastering multiple influences and dress styles. For example, when working on "Dakar City of Birds" Kane taught herself *njaxas*, the patchwork technique in use among the Baye Fall of Senegal that symbolizes "unity in diversity" (Roberts and Roberts, p. 424). The members of this Muslim brotherhood are known for the vivid colours and unique designs of their garments that were originally made by sewing together retrieved or donated scraps of cloth. In "Dakar City of Birds" there was a patchwork pencil skirt of such design made with vertical technicolour stripes and adorned with outside pockets, is presented with a white t-shirt and oversize bomber jacket in electric blue, sporting the table fan insignia on the back. Here Kane's surreal interpretation of tradition and heritage reframes religious dress as hipster and desirable commodity. For "Iconic Capsule" she instead learned to braid hair, applying synthetic ropes to the garments.





Inspired by Kane's experiences as an underground artist, these detours infuse elements of Dakar's urban aesthetic into naif and futuristic styles. In the process, they also position the designer within the Senegalese network of artists-as-activists (Ardizzoni, 2017). This section discusses Kane's commitment to broadcasting another vision of Dakar through punk styles that reference the city's history of community activism. SRK's collections show a deep connection with Dakar's street scene that gathers artists committed to uplifting the population through creative work. "17 Rue Jules Ferry" (Autumn/Winter 2017) celebrates the bustling environment that feeds this activist ecology, referencing Dakar's vibrant urban palette and some of the iconic protagonists of its cultural life. The official description of the collection is a manifesto of African bohemia: "Dakar is a blend of conformity underlined by an heritage of cyclic rebellion and transgression. Streets illustrate the city's internal doubts, oscillating between uniformity and irregular patterns, uniqueness and mimicry, ignorance of the poorest while seeking their contribution to the equilibrium" (*17 Rue Jules Ferry AW17*). Accordingly, the collection is conceived as "a reminder that the growing uniformity experienced in the city isn't in Dakar's essential language" (*17 Rue Jules Ferry AW17*). So Kane re-imagines the radical aesthetic of this counter-cultural movement as sport evening wear that blends shapely, moulded, and silhouette-altering volumes, eclectic quilting, embroidery, and mixed fabrics in a vivid palette that foregrounds the brown hues of unpaved African roads. She also creates her own punk hagiography. A large portrait of the director Djibril Diop Mambéty is embroidered on the back of an oversize quilted *bazin* jacket in maroon, worn over purple knee-high velvet boots and a black midi skirt embellished with appliqués (Figure 8). Mambéty, the founder of Africa's *nouvelle vague* cinema, captured the cultural turmoil and aspirations of the post-independence years. In *Touki Bouki*, his most iconic film from 1973, he trains the camera on the "cultural dislocation" (Springer, 2007, p. 143) of two young protagonists, developing a "discontinuous" style that reflects their sense of restlessness and rebellion (Springer, 2007, p. 142).⁷ This non-linear treatment of social angst shows in "17 Rue Jules Ferry." The "Yoff top and dress," named after a beach town in Dakar, are designed with stitched bands of *bazin* in brown, yellow, and electric blue (Figure 9). The outfit sports the embroidered word "Dakar" (in white) and "RTYE," and acronym found on express buses in Yoff, across the hips and at the bottom of the skirt (in red and contrasting grey outline). A band of diamond-shaped *bazin* cuts stretches across the front of the skirt, separating the writings. Irregular yellow embroidery highlights the margins of the diamonds that have geometric segments of blue, brown, and dove-grey. Tassels dangle from the top half of the sleeves, an inch below the margin that joins the maroon and yellow stripes. High-reliefs of bulging eyes are embroidered in the front of the sweater at nipple height (clearly creating a visual pun), enclosed by swoosh-like shapes placed above and below the eyes, which are separated by a grey shining star with a black outline. Here again Kane revisits dress codes and semantic repertoires, making new connections that capture the perception of a changing world.

⁷ Mambéty's work has inspired other African fashion designers and artists too. The Nigerian photographer and stylist Daniel Obasi referenced *Touki Bouti* in the fashion film *An Alien in Town* (2018) in collaboration with Vlisco, where he uses an alien's point of view to highlight the complexities of his home country. For further information on Obasi's work, see Picarelli (2018).



Figure 8: SRK, "17 Rue Jules Ferry" AW2017.



Figure 9: SRK, "17 Rue Jules Ferry" AW2017.

In particular, her styles participate in the construction of new identities and pro-active models of citizenship that encourage freedom of expression and creativity. Dakar's alternative scene is also referenced in the name of the collection, which is an homage to the late Senegalese artist Joe Ouakam whose courtyard, located at 17 Rue Jules Ferry and now destroyed, was "a mythical space that gathered what Dakar had best in terms of transgressive creative processes and cross-disciplinary vision" (*17 Rue Jules Ferry AW17*). Kane remembers Ouakam as the forefather of the street scene that emerged at the end of the 1980s and that she joined in the late 2000s (Touré, 2017). African historian Alessandro Triulzi (1996) and fashion scholar Leslie Rabine (2002) trace the inception of this movement to the *Set/Setal* (Wolof for "be clean/make clean") protests of 1987–1988, when youths and the unemployed from Dakar's poorest neighbourhoods countered sprawling urban decay with grassroots initiatives like clean-ups and graffiti actions. The "talking walls" of Dakar are a lasting symbol of this collective declaration of dignity based in the value of beautification, the same principle that inspires the Senegalese's practice of "dressing well" that uplifts the individual regardless of his/her circumstances. The graffiti link art-making and social action, reclaiming disintegrating spaces with strokes of brilliant colour and intricate designs that elaborate on themes that are relevant to the community. The title of Rabine's essay on this subject, "These walls belong to everybody," summarizes the ethos behind this movement: "to heed [a] message of civic-minded communalism" (2014, p. 95).

Kane shares this commitment. The creative interpretation of Senegalese counter culture and grassroots activism we have seen in "*17 Rue Jules Ferry*" advances a cosmopolitanism rooted in African post-colonial experiences and networks of material and immaterial production. In an interview with the Pan-African art platform *Afrobougee* she expounds on her experiences as an African designer vis-a-vis global networks of production: "We are all at the same level of information from Abuja to Dakar, from Tokyo to Paris and it has affected the way we consider our craft, the way we apprehend its valorization. Today, Senegalese and I guess, African creative profiles need to focus on major issues that should have been taken care of by higher political institutions but unfortunately things take time to change" (*Selly Raby Kane FW 2014*). This effort includes reshaping the global perception of Senegal and Africa at large as fantastic realms, sites of anarchic becoming and transformation that demand imaginative efforts on the part of her audience. This is where her strategy of fashion as storytelling proves to be a form of cultural entrepreneurship that intends to change conventions while generating material and immaterial value for the community.

Alien Happenings: Building Future Fashion

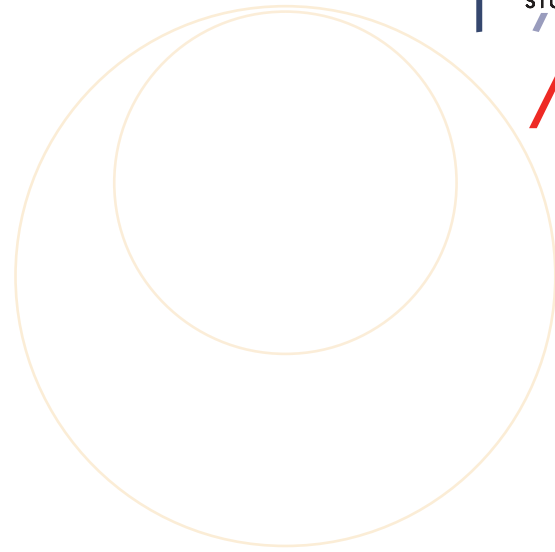
Kane claims that her foray into fashion was prompted by a desire to diversify the uniformity of prêt-à-porter and champion the kind of “bizarre” aesthetic that does not make the cut of mainstream looks (Les Petites Pierres, 2013). In a video interview published on *Design Indaba’s* website, she explains that she enjoys creating sci-fi designs that startle her audience and force it to think differently about what they can do with the garments: “When I present a collection I want people to dive into a universe, I want them to dive into a story, and I want them to feel in an out-of-time space” (Sebambom, 2018). The surreal artwork that she creates to promote the collection takes this passion for the fantastic to another level, featuring naive designs that include baobab trees growing human ears, steaks, mirrored insects, geometric shapes, and supernatural creatures with human features roaming the sahel (Figure 10 and Figure 11). Often this fantastic world becomes three-dimensional, inspiring shows that build immersive experiences around the presentation of garments and accessories. Kane intends such events as occasions of encounter and exchange that foster connections among actors in the city, as well as a new way to approach and engage with the urban texture. Designs come alive in a surreal fashionscape that feeds off and feeds back into the urban ecosystem, highlighting her goal of “rebranding Dakar” (Farrell, 2017) and inventing tools of social change that draw from local resources and existing networks of production.



Figure 10: An example of Kane's surrealist art.



Figure 11: SRK, "Alien Cartoon".



In 2013 Kane collaborated with a number of artists in Dakar to create the fashion show “Be Street,” which spread across 4000 square meters of settings and recreated typical Senegalese urban scenes. This was her first attempt at experimenting with the idea of community design, the approach with which she emphasizes the mutual relationship between fashion and place — in this specific case Dakar, making visible and reshaping cultural traditions, and in the process originating new audiences and forms of engagement with the urban. This approach is consistent with the artistic vision of the *Les Petites Pierres*, the collective she joined in 2009 that engages in social activities that promote cultural dialogue and exchange across Dakar’s compartmentalized neighbourhoods through artistic interventions on the urban sphere. These initiatives recall notable others such as The Carnival, a procession of costume characters that takes place in the street of the Medina neighbourhood of Dakar where Oumou Sy, its founder and one of the most successful Senegalese designers of all times, brings her haute couture styles to a popular audience. The scholar of African fashion Hudita Mustapha (2001, p. 45) describes this show as an example of the strategies that Senegalese designers have used through time to “ma[k]e the colonial capital their own,” fashion and theatre becoming means to reclaim space as place and foster a sense of community in a post-colonial context.

In 2014 Kane launched the project “Save the Old Lady” to preserve the dilapidated site of Dakar’s historical train station, hosting a two-week art show inside this structure. The event created an alternate reality where local artists exhibited their works for sale and decorative purposes. On the opening night a labyrinth installation was mounted in the station’s forecourt, preparing the audience for the sensory experience awaiting inside the building. The station was refitted to resemble an alien village of the year 2244, where Kane presented “Alien Cartoon” (Autumn/Winter 2014), her most surrealist collection to date that fantasizes about an encounter between humans and fantastic creatures (Figure 12).

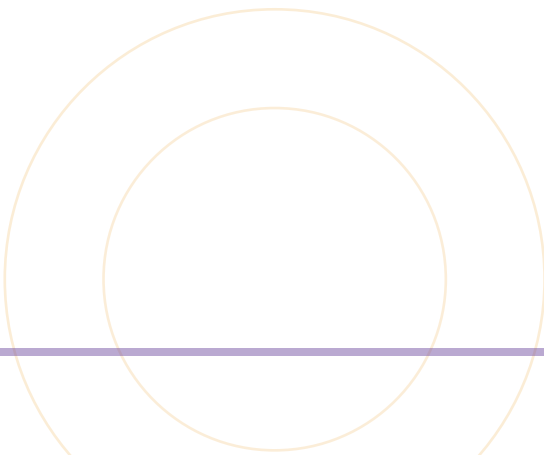




Figure 12: "Alien Cartoon" fashion show at Dakar's old train station.

Silk, PVC, and tulle prevail in this range of structured styles that draw from Kane's knowledge of horror and science fiction. The digital prints with zebra and sardine motifs (among other animals) that embellish the garments highlight her intention of introducing technological elements in her designs, while the high-relief embroidered and geometric shapes that adorn a black bodysuit worn under a red leather blazer seem to be fit for an interstellar traveller of space-age lore (Figure 13). The art show featured 25 actors sporting quilted facial masks and futuristic headgear in shiny materials who played alien invaders, moving through giant installations resembling insects and monstrous creatures made with recycled wares. This show reclaimed an abandoned space as a site of inter-urban dialogue, inviting artists and citizens to mingle and overcome sociocultural boundaries. The science-fictional framework cast a positive light on the idea of spontaneous hybridization, with fashion becoming a catalyst of social engineering all the while generating actual value for the designer and her collaborators.



Selly Raby Kane
Fall & Winter - 2014
Photo credits © Jean-Baptiste Joire

Figure 13: SRK, "Alien Cartoon" AW2014.

These happenings and the collections they showcase are the result of Kane's constant dialogue and engagement with her surroundings. Her garments are traces of past encounters, as in the case of "17 Rue Jules Ferry" that unearths Kane's memories of being a young artist hanging out at Ouakam's atelier, and activators of new ones, as in the case of "Alien Cartoon" where garments and accessories evoke a future that, regardless of whether or not it will happen, is already affecting the present. The affective experience of wonder, discovery, and investigation that she ascribes to living in Dakar translates into a repertoire of signs that weave a narrative about the Senegalese capital as a place where "different temporalities co-exist" (Alexandre, 2018). A look at her social media presence confirms her goal of opening up a space of discussion and activating new imaginative practices of community-making and empowerment in Senegal and Africa at large. Ever since founding Muus du Tux (Wolof for "the cat doesn't smoke") in December 2017, a showroom, exhibition space, and boutique located in Sacré Cœur III in Dakar that she shares with other artists, Kane has increasingly used Instagram to showcase the socio-environmental mark that the local subculture is making on Dakar's urban geography, a mark that she hopes to transfer to the mainstream imagination of her hometown and Africa. On Instagram, she alternates between posting photographs of her new styles and promoting the many events held at Muus du Tux, such as the premier of the short film "Anyism," described as "a 'stunning' interrogation of life and the human being," and the immersive installation "TRI AA FURCULA MANIFEST," an exploration of "talismanic writing as an instrument of investigation of the future." These initiatives expand on Kane's original goal of "rebranding Dakar" (Farrell, 2017) through fashion, creating styles that embody the many and diverging sides of the metropolis and show it as a realm of possibility and becoming. It is interesting to filter this design philosophy through the speculative lens she offers in a text she published on her personal website entitled "Agit'Art 'La cloche de fourmis.'" The last section reads:

We are inside. We swarm. We take care of a space that constantly invites you to connect re-readings with each other. That of our cities first, that we no longer see, superimpositions of realities, hyper-positions of our expectations and our actions that obscure most of our time by their density and multiplicity. Make this ultra-space sacred at the dawn of an era where we seek to restore certain historical truths and part of its heritage to Africa, the urban decadent in which we launch our calls erects heavenly barricades made of mysticism and technology, art and citizenship, deep impulses and frustrations that the daily mask of his indifference.

Unanimous deference to our fantastic postures, our urban tribes are rushing like an armada of ants to conquer new conjugations in the deconstruction of this chaos (Agit'Art 'La cloche de fourmis').

The process of deconstruction and re-building that she outlines in this visionary text expands to encompass other realms of design and artistic production. Dakar is the setting of two films by Kane: the fashion clip *Inner Cruise*, directed by Tom Escarmelle in 2013, and the virtual reality short entitled *The Other Dakar* (2017). In both instances fashion facilitates a reflection on Dakar's elusive nature as a dynamic locale fuelled by an invisible energy and in a state of constant transformation. Senegalese mythology inspires these explorations of a place ruled by opposing forces — visually rendered, for example, in the black-and-white sheath dresses worn by the protagonists of "Inner Cruise". Once again Kane invents a dream-like environment where nature and technology overlap to affect her re-signification of "Africa" and foreground Dakar's crucial but overlooked role within global circuits of art and fashion.

The sci-fi aesthetic and sense of situated-ness link Kane's work to that of other artists from the continent who also focus on urbanity and technoculture.⁸ They all share the label of afrofuturists, although their approach differs from the North American version. Tegan Bristow observes that such artists share a desire to provide creative representations of African futures that not only "move past Western notions of a dystopian Africa," but also engage critically "on the traditions and politics of a continent with a desperate need to encounter its contemporary self" (2013, p. 4). The examples I have given in this essay show that Kane engages with her home town through a psychogeographic lens that emphasizes the imaginary and the affective, overlaying new meanings and imaginative possibilities on the actual map of the metropolis and some of its iconic locations. Fashion design is her tool to make sense of this deep, affective connection and give back to Dakar. Garments and accessories further this dialogue with her surroundings, taking part in the aesthetic flow that shapes and reshapes the experience of the city as a living ecosystem, all the while reframing the global perception of this and by extension, other African metropolises as creative hubs. The process of deconstruction that she enacts seems to be the matrix of all her expressive practices and what makes her work an interesting, if not unique, case study of African fashion spearheading a larger reconfiguration of the global discourse on Africa and African identities based on reclaiming not only the means of representations of the dressed body, but the right to.

Conclusion

Kane's surrealist Afro-fusion designs express a vision of African modernity as an ongoing cultural project. Conceived as part of an expansive narrative universe, they symbolize the interweaving of worlds that generated this hybrid modernity, providing blacks on the continent and across the diaspora with a range of identity options attuned to their cosmopolitan lifestyles. Significantly, Kane brings her Senegalese heritage to bear on this design vision. She professes the desire to use fashion as a platform to showcase African talent and generate value for her community. To this end, she develops initiatives aimed at fostering a sense of community in Dakar, operating as a social innovator and agent of change.

⁸ In 2016 she took part in the "Elsewhen" project at Dakar's Biennale of Contemporary Arts along artists such as Paul Sika, Jean Luc Gosse, Jeremiah Ojo, and Jim Chu Chu. This collaborative work reflected on the theme of the future through innovative media such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and video mapping.

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Enrica Picarelli is an independent researcher, translator, and author of the research blog *Afrosartorialism*. She received a PhD in Cultural and Postcolonial Studies of the Anglophone World at “L’Orientale” University of Naples and was a “Michael Ballhaus Fellow” at the Center for Digital Cultures at Leuphana University of Lueneburg and a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Comparative Cultures at Lisbon’s University. She has authored book chapters and articles in refereed journals in the fields of television studies, digital media, and fashion studies. She has contributed solicited essays to online magazines including *IAM – Intense Art Magazine*, *Blacks to the Future*, and *African Digital Art* and now writes for the art magazines *Something We Africans Got* and *The Art Momentum*. Her current research focuses on fashionability and the African fashion aesthetic on digital media.

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