

# Crafting Utopias Through Fashion in Ghana and Senegal

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## Abstract

This article introduces two case studies of ethical fashion from Senegal and Ghana: the Africanfuturist brand Selly Raby Kane, based in Dakar, and the Slum Studio collective operating off Kantamanto Market in Accra. Both engage critically with the global politics of clothing, developing place-sensitive and art-inspired responses informed by decolonial approaches to expressive meaning to the multiple threats engendered by the global fashion system.

**Keywords:** African fashion; Decolonial design; Africanfuturism; Ghana; Senegal.

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As climate change hits the planet with full force and global emergencies spread, the notion of sustainability is (or should be) at the forefront of every conversation. How do we achieve a balanced harmony between species and spheres of life? How do we guarantee prosperity for all? Although fashion has joined the conversation, a lot more needs to be done. The contribution of this industry to planetary imbalances is well known. Several reports show that fashion is a top-rated environmental threat for being, among other things, a major air and water polluter, a huge consumer of land and forests, and a producer of hazardous waste.<sup>1</sup> Social justice movements have uncovered systemic racism and cultural exploitation, whereas the Covid-19 pandemic showed how big a social and economic disruptor fashion is. The industry's response to the negative effects of Covid — fashion weeks canceled, stores closed for several weeks, and unsold inventory mounting — was to balance losses by renegeing on payments to manufacturers and this amplified a pre-existing humanitarian crisis in countries whose economies are tightly bound to the fast fashion machine.<sup>2</sup> The geographical distribution of such losses — with a disproportionate amount borne by the Global South — invites a reflection on what responsibility, resilience, adaptation, and prosperity — the keywords of our critical historical juncture — mean from different locales of the global fashion map. This article introduces a West African perspective on ethical fashion, focusing on two case studies from Ghana and Senegal. These examples present a critical engagement with the global politics of clothing and Western responses to the threats of the Anthropocene informed by decolonial approaches to expressive meaning.

## The Slum Studio in Accra

Sel Kofiga is a visual artist/designer based in Accra, Ghana and the member of a network of local activists fighting fashion pollution in the country. His creative production — comprising garment collections, installations, art exhibitions, and knowledge initiatives — highlights the disruptive effects of textile overconsumption, proposing creative and place-sensitive solutions to this problem.

Kofiga launched his ethical label “The Slum Studio” [hereafter TSS] in 2018<sup>3</sup> in response to the mounting crisis precipitated by garment waste accumulation in Ghana — which is a major global destination for discarded fashion. Accra, in particular, is the main reception hub of used clothing in the whole of West Africa and home to the massive Kantamanto market. Kofiga's workshop is located inside this locale, where he sources the materials for his clothes/artworks and educates the local community on circular consumption and sustainable fashion. At Kantamanto, 15 million second-hand clothes arrive each week and sales of up to 10 million dollars are made daily.<sup>4</sup> The vast majority of these garments are cast-offs of fast fashion brands — either unsold, used, unwanted, or excess items — that are shipped off from charities in the global North, which in turn receive them from private consumers and companies that dispose of them quickly to make room for new styles.<sup>5</sup> Kantamanto — like hundreds of other second-hand markets across the African continent — is vital to keep in place the hyper-accelerated production model of the global fashion industry, whose de-centered architecture locates creative production/ownership in the Global North and manufacture/disposal in the Global South, effectively creating a hierarchy of

1. See for example Kirsi Niinimäki et al., “The environmental price of fast fashion,” *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment*, Vol. 1.4 (2020): 189–200.
2. Taylor Brydges, Monique Retamal, and Mary Hanlon, “Will COVID-19 support the transition to a more sustainable fashion industry?,” *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, Vol. 16.1 (2020): 300.
3. The Slum Studio, <http://theslumstudio.com/>.
4. Lydia Ayorkor Manieson and Tiziana Ferrero-Regis, “Castoff from the West, pearls in Kantamanto?: A critique of second-hand clothing,” *Journal of Industrial Ecology* (2022): 1–11.
5. The trade became widespread in the 1960s, when Ghana started importing second-hand clothes from the United States. There, the expansion of the ready-to-wear industry and easier access to consumer credit accelerated the shift to a consumerist model of growth that depended on the chronic overproduction of garments. In order to make people spend, new collections were made seasonally, replacing previous trends. Framed as charity towards a country ‘in need,’ the exportation of used clothes was necessary to keep the economy in the States growing. Ever since, buying second-hand clothes has become ingrained in the Ghanaian dress culture, which traditionally valued preservation and recycling — with fabric and garments passed down from generation to generation.

power that turns countries like Ghana into environmental and cultural wastelands.<sup>6</sup> Cheap labour in Kantamanto absorbs clothing waste produced and capitalized upon elsewhere, receiving no benefits and experiencing huge environmental degradation, as almost 60% of the imported goods cannot be sold, because they are either damaged beyond repair, or considered unfashionable by customers. Since Accra lacks the landfill space and economic means to dispose of it, textile waste simply lays around, permanently altering the land and marine environments and even polluting the air, as it is often burned illegally.<sup>7</sup> At the symbolic level, fashion's colonization of the Ghanaian environment feeds a dress aesthetic that thrives on hyper-consumption and on notions of fashionability that favor foreign brands over local ones. The common perception is that foreign fashion is more desirable than Ghanaian fashion, a perception that strengthens the assumption of a material and immaterial dependence on the West.

Kofiga tackles this system of dependence via regenerative strategies and visual interventions that call attention to the lifecycle of clothes and the unequal politics of the global fashion industry. Combining ethnography, photography, painting, dyeing and other textile-based actions with research and writing, he details the life of his community as it is shaped by the flow of garments. His creations are a product of this ecosystem and a response to the Western myth of African scarcity that justifies the second-hand trade. All of them are made with used and off-cut fabrics that Kofiga hand-picks and hand-dyes in Kantamanto. The manufacture process is photographed and documented on TSS's website and further circulated on the brand's Instagram profile, where the 'behind the scenes' shots offer a glimpse of the deep impact of the second-hand trade. On the social networking platform, Kofiga also shares promotional shots from his look books and text posts on his creative philosophy that unpack fashion's system of inequality.

“We all know the politics involved in how the West's mass production has ... underdeveloped not just African fashion but the economic growth of the continent ... because our space is seen as a dumping site. [This] economic strategy ... locks us into the idea of ... dependency on the West. This indeed is worrying but also gives us a reason to find out what we could do to collectively challenge the narrative and tell the story through our own lens. My ... contribution is to call out to let others realize how important it is to look out for numerous ways of constructively engaging this problem.”<sup>8</sup>

In this statement, Kofiga shares his goal of raising community awareness on the accumulative and exploitative structure of the global second-hand trade. His creative direction of TSS campaigns and curation of his Instagram profile especially express his desire of manifesting agency and resisting exploitation through form and composition.

TSS's latest line, called “Cloth(ing) the Green” (2021), explores the spatial politics of waste and regeneration in Ghana, creating a connection between two of the country's most conspicuous sites of environmentalist attention: Kantamanto and the Aburi Botanic Gardens.<sup>9</sup> These gardens, located in Eastern Ghana, are the setting of the look book that introduces “Cloth(ing) the Green” (photographed by Kevin Kwabia) and a symbol of environmentalism, described as one of 1,800 gardens around the world that are “leading the fight to save plant diversity.”<sup>10</sup> In the collection of photographs, two models showcase Kofiga's trademark pastel-colored creations against the background of a green and luscious forest. The forest — a realm of natural abundance — is a classic trope of extractive colonialist narratives and a metonym for the African continent as a source of endless wealth, ripe for exploitation, including by the fashion industry.

The intricate decorations on the clothes depict another dark aspect of this narrative, that of the aftermath of extraction, the end-of-life phase of consumption. In fact, the symbols and writings hand-

6. Sandra Niessen, “Fashion, Its Sacrifice Zone, and Sustainability,” *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 24.6 (2020): 859–877.

7. For an in-depth exploration of this issue see Liz Ricketts, “This is Not Your Goldmine. This is Our Mess,” *Atmos*, January 30, 2021, <https://atmos.earth/fashion-clothing-waste-letter-ghana/>.

8. Sel Kofiga, “Talents: Sel Kofiga, The Slum Studio,” *Afrosartorialism*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.afrosartorialism.net/2021/01/>.

9. “The Slum Studio: Cloth(ing) the Green,” *Nataal*, November 15, 2021, <https://nataal.com/the-slum-studio>.

10. “Aburi Botanic Gardens,” *Botanic Gardens Conservation International*, <https://tools.bgci.org/garden.php?id=1246>.

painted on the fabrics reference Kantamanto, which is the site of another type of diversity. For example, in a photograph showing a detail of stretched hands, a blue eye is painted on the sleeve reaching out at top left. The eye — called “Nyame Ani” — symbolizes “selection.” Selection is the time-consuming activity by which retailers at the market inspect the bales of cloth that they buy content-unknown, picking out the items that they will be able to resell. Selection is the core of the economy of subsistence of hundreds of mostly-female retailers, whose ability to make a profit is bound to the negotiable value and quality of the clothes. Many of them take out loans with 35 percent interest rates to purchase the bales of clothing, but only 20% make an actual profit. Almost none of them are able to come out of the cycle of debt they got into to get the money to buy the bales in the first place. Used fast fashion items, in fact, are considered of little worth in Ghana as elsewhere in the world. Resellers complain that it is becoming harder for them to make a living, due to the rapidly deteriorating quality of the items, the quick trend turn-around, and the bad conditions in which they arrive. While charities and recycling platforms in the Global North can pass down the clothing they cannot sell/circulate, Kantamanto retailers have no outlet for the items they cannot sell. Instead, they must absorb the debts of the entire industry. This chokes their ability to rehabilitate lower quality goods, discover new methods of upcycling or develop alternative business opportunities, and this leaves many people in a situation of food scarcity amid piles of clothing waste.<sup>11</sup>

Kofiga offers a creative response to these criticalities, crafting clothes and media that contribute to re-circulate both material waste and the anti-dependency narrative that comes with it. Rejects become resources to re-conceptualize economic supremacy and cultural influence through a local perspective. In an interview from January 2021, he describes sustainable work as a place-bound process of knowledge and material production that centers local worldviews, practices, and beliefs and creates social cohesion while being respectful of nature. In this sense, his work can be included among the African “ecomedia” that Cajetan Iheka analyzes in his monograph by the same name.<sup>12</sup> These are cultural artifacts that visualize the impact of ecological degradation, contributing a critique of human exploitative relationship with the environment and a creative proposal to address the problem of climate change from a Southern perspective.

Kofiga’s garments are social tapestries, documenting life at Kantamanto with graphic representations that subscribe to the West African tradition of infusing patterns with information on the lifestyle and culture of a people. For example, he has developed a color palette of the market where yellow references the color of the bales of cloth, black is the people, red represents the energy of the market space, and pink its soundscape. These formal choices nurture a sense of community and cultural pride. At the studio, Kofiga keeps alive knowledge of heritage textile work and dyeing. There, he collaborates with fellow creatives and members of the Kantamanto community on initiatives to circulate this knowledge, and educate people on the harmful effects of fast fashion and on the colonial and neocolonial history of the second-hand trade. The circular economy is his framework to speak about the imbalances of global power in his vivid description of Kantamanto as a dumping site. Showcasing stories from a place that is considered at the margin of global fashion and using traditional techniques and natural pigments to up-cycle textile waste, Kofiga plays on the dichotomy worth/waste, finding value in the Ghanaian heritage of textile preservation and giving value to materials elsewhere considered worthless by infusing them with local stories and meanings. This is where his critical practice builds on decolonial activism to create a framework of engagement with local sustainable practices that centers Ghanaian voices. Notably, this perspective puts a strong emphasis on the interrelation of knowledge-production and material production through a focus on alternative genealogies and trajectories of fashion. TSS works closely with activists and scholars committed to de-centering the Eurocentric standards and views of what accounts for sustainable fashion and give the floor to a different set of terms and methods of achieving human-nature balance.

For Kofiga reuse is a way to connect the past and the future of Ghana, contributing a perspective on establishing a network of practices of emancipation that uplift people and the planet. In so doing, they cre-

11. For further details on the Kantamanto economy see The OR Foundation, <https://theor.org/>.

12. Cajetan Iheka, *African Ecomedia: Network Forms, Planetary Politics* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2021), 6.

ate a narrative around fashion that sees upcycling, reuse, and recycling as tools of emancipation founded on socio-cultural resilience. Emancipation here is another word for development— a word loaded with meaning in the African context, all the more so in times of climate emergency, when development mediates the relationship between human and natural survival. The U.N. sustainable development goals — the guidelines of the global green transition — are based on applying the principle of sustainable development first circulated in the late 1980s, which describes it as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This is generally intended as a model of controlled, hyper-efficient economic expansion that deploys technological means to mitigate the negative outcomes of uninterrupted production. The tag on many fast fashion clothes purporting to be sustainable displays this techno-efficient approach clearly. Within radical fashion studies, this model has come under scrutiny for prioritizing commerce, uninterrupted growth and capitalist accumulation over environmental and social well-being.<sup>13</sup> Sustainable development solutions re-signify, but do not offset, consumerism and the system of unchecked mass production responsible for the multiple emergencies hitting countries like Ghana. As John Ehrenfeldt notes:

“the fundamental coupling between efficiency and growth will not allow significant reductions in environmental and social harms ... [T]he fashion industry ... should not label any of its sustaino-efficient actions as producing sustainability, saying instead only that they are reducing unsustainability.”<sup>14</sup>

Unsurprisingly, in the Ghanaian cultural industry as elsewhere on the continent, sustainable development is a contentious notion that raises more questions than gives answers, particularly regarding the idea of growth, which, ties local prosperity to participating in a global configuration that is accumulative, extracting and exploitative.

To better frame the contribution of Kofiga and his community to this debate, it is useful to quote Costanza Parra, who invites us to focus on the word “need” in the original definition of sustainable development:

“The undefined ‘needs’ mentioned by the Brundtland’s definition are not on the whole consistent across the globe, through all levels of society, or at different stages of life, or even when filtered through ideology or faith. One’s person’s need is another person’s excess or dearth; when one set of ‘needs’ is fulfilled, another ... is denied.”<sup>15</sup>

In contexts like Ghana, the second-hand economy creates a specific set of needs that are different from those experienced in the Global North. Kofiga’s case shows that need as material and immaterial. Material need is for a redistributive economic system that generates enough resources to tackle the environmental crisis and come out of the cycle of dependency. Immaterial need is for a reckoning with the system of persistent inequalities that configures the country as a dumping site, subjected to other needs, those for growth of the global fashion system.

## A Senegalese Utopia

Selly Raby Kane is a Senegalese polymath who works at the intersection of fashion and the visual arts. After launching her first collection more than a decade ago, she has joined the pan-African movement for the decolonization of design, becoming one of its prominent members. Her body of work includes ten dress collections, three short films, and visual artworks spanning digital collages, photographs, and mixed-media sculptures that represent her native Senegal in a futuristic and ironic light. These works have been shown at international events, including Design Indaba, Cannes Film Festival, and the 2022

13. Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham, *Earth Logic: Fashion Action Research Plan* (London: The JJ Charitable Trust, 2019).

14. John Ehrenfeldt, “The Real Challenge of Sustainability,” in *Routledge Handbook of Sustainability and Fashion*, eds. Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 60.

15. Costanza Parra quoted in *Culture in, for and as Sustainable Development*, eds. Joost Dessein et al. (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2015), 24.

Dakar Biennale.<sup>16</sup> Many of them are collaborative projects that seek to strengthen pan-African resilience through community engagement and social innovation. This goal also inspires the events Kane hosts at her atelier in Dakar, where she and the other members of the art collective Muus du Tux promote creative approaches to environmentalism and urban sustainability.

Like Kofiga, Kane regards art and fashion as tools of change, which respond to environmental and humanitarian emergencies via creative actions rooted in local forms of knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Her brand of surreal pop art Africanizes the African-American futurist tradition, infusing it with cultural influences ranging from free jazz, to street art, and Senegalese mythology.<sup>18</sup> This blend of references reflects Kane's status of cosmopolitan African, who was exposed to Western culture from a young age and spent long periods of time abroad. Her main focus are the African urban experience and the Afropolis as a realm of possibility, where visions of possible worlds-to-come are incubated. Dakar inspired at least two of Kane's fashion collection — "Dakar City of Birds" (Fall/Winter 2015) and "17 Rue Jules Ferry" (Fall/Winter 2017) —, it was the setting of the fashion film *Inner Cruise* (2013), which she styled, and a character of the virtual reality film *The Other Dakar* (2017) that she directed, which charts a little girl's journey in the mystical heart of the city. Here, like in the dystopic short film *Jant Yi* (2021) that Kane also wrote, styled, and directed, the Senegalese capital comes to life as a place of magic and mystery, ruled by a primordial force that outpowers human intention.<sup>19</sup> This fascination for the invisible and the mysterious runs through her entire oeuvre. Imagination is Kane's weapon to effect social change. She is a science fiction enthusiast and studies talismanic writing, which she believes have the potential to unlock access to other realms. References to superheroes and alien encounters are staples of the stories her designs are based on.<sup>20</sup> These epistemic pursuits inform her critique of cultural power imbalances in the world of fashion and design. She claims that exploring the unknown is her way of practicing freedom and of freeing others to imagine counter-futures that reject ideas of prosperity, resilience, and even survival generated in the Global North.<sup>21</sup> Again like Kofiga, she does that by laying out a cartography that re-signifies notions of centre and margin based on a semiotic and cultural archeology of an undiscovered Dakar, that is real and fictional at the same time. This esoteric locale is home to a set of beliefs that originate in the pre-colonial past, mystical cults and indigenous mythologies that find no space in Western "understated" narratives.<sup>22</sup> By paying homage to them, Kane situates the source of resilience and prosperity in her immediate surroundings, "convening the imaginary and Senegalese immaterial heritage as efficient tools to change our relationship to what is alive."<sup>23</sup>

Reclaiming semiotic density and formal complexity are the first steps Kane takes to dismantle exogenous solutions to global emergencies. Her collections display signs and symbols found across urban spaces and the threads of stories they carry within their forms. Like an urban archeologist, she pieces

16. Kane is also one of ten creatives from the continent, who collaborated on the Afro-inspired Ikea line *Overalt* and regularly speaks at events as a cultural critic.

17. Selly Raby Kane, "S1E3: Selly Raby Kane: Designing the Future," *Creative Development with International Finance Corporation*, [https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/news\\_ext\\_content/ifc\\_external\\_corporate\\_site/news+and+events/podcasts/cdp-s1e3](https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/news_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/news+and+events/podcasts/cdp-s1e3).

18. This cultural mash-up translates into designs that foreground themes of technophilia and metamorphosis. Collections and artworks display recurring visual elements like diamonds, doves, baobabs, fans, and water creatures, which act like the characters in an expansive storyworld.

19. *Jant Yi* tells of an African future in which humans are forced to produce electricity with their bodies in exchange for breathable air. The film ends with a real call to action to end environmental disruption.

20. For example, in 2021 she introduced a "neoleather jacket" featuring geometric leather inserts and bands in maroon, ocre, and white sewn over a black net-like material that cascades down the sides of the asymmetrical front. The look has elements of the spacesuit of 1970s sci-fi films and TV series, like the tight fit and parallel armbands covering the forearms, whereas the combination of contrasting materials and textures, especially the use of the net, is one of the designer's trademarks. The capture of the garment's picture that Kane uploaded to her Instagram profile on 30 November, reads "For all the superheroes." See Selly Raby Kane (@sellyrabykane), "For all the superheroes," Instagram photo, November 30, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CW6OHOVL3NI/>.

21. "Selly Raby Kane sur Vraimag", *You Tube*, June 18, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEL6aP3BwGI>.

22. Selly Raby Kane, *The Other Dakar*, Cape Town: Electric South.

23. Selly Raby Kane, "Jant Yi," *Little Sun*, <https://littlesun.org/fastforward/selly-raby-kane-jant-yi/>.



together fragments of the near and distant past to read the present and, in the process, develop a formal apparatus — a material medium — to refocus her perception according to a different set of values and meanings. The skin of Dakar becomes her object of research. She scans the vernacular marks that stretch across the urban epidermis — graffiti, hand-painted shop signs, murals, leaflets, posters, which art scholar Joanna Grabski calls the “myriad ocular phenomena” making up Dakar’s *mise-en-scene*.<sup>24</sup> “17 Rue Jules Ferry” takes its name from the address of the atelier of Ramangelissa Samb (alternatively known as Joe Ouakam), who was the artist-icon of Dakar’s counter-culture until his death in 2017. The line reconnects with Samb’s situationist philosophy, which led him to open the art space Laboratoire Agit’Art in 1974. Although now demolished, the atelier has survived in the imagination of Kane’s generation as a symbol of radical creative freedom and self-determined change. Its ethical legacy survives in maximalist styles that feature strong contrasts, extravagant adornments, intricate embroideries, and experiments with shapes that call attention to the relationship between dress, body, and space. The optical assemblage of visual and material signs of the collection, with its geometry and contrasting hues, textures, and fabrics, renders the transgressive mood of Samb’s courtyard and its valorization of art for community uplift. The collection merges his political teachings with the signs and motifs extracted from Dakar’s opulent visualscape, establishing new connections between past and present that capture the perception of a changing world. In the bit of description she offers about “17,” Kane states she was inspired to draw this collection by bearing witness to Dakar’s negotiation of an identity based on what she calls a “misconception of modernity” informed by the myth of a better elsewhere identified with Paris or Dubai.<sup>25</sup>

Kane makes explicit her strategy of creating visual meaning to shift relations of power in favour of her community by exposing unknown or hidden connections. “17” draws a link between past and present, post-independence liberation and millennial disorientation, but also between the Senegalese ‘here’ of beaches, art spaces, highways, and the ‘elsewhere’ of global fashion. By tracing her art lineage back to the counter-culture of the 1970s, Kane broadcasts her positionality and the affordances that this cultural milieu allows her to mobilize fashion design as a *mode* of displaying the entanglements of knowledge, practice, and matter. Further, it aids her project of inciting exchanges between local communities and citizens. A member of two art collectives, Kane is especially sensitive to the plight for acknowledgement of local creatives believing that art, including fashion, can change society and trigger a virtuous cycle of improvement. Kane states that her close relationship with street artists and their communities has taught her to interpret sustainability as a social mandate that grounds eco-system resilience in a new set of relations that emphasize the emotional connections, human interactions, and grassroots agency of disadvantaged groups.

The goal of creating a space to simultaneously inhabit and reflect critically on the epistemologies of the present also informed the 2014 “Alien Cartoon” collection that launched Kane and whose storyline imagined aliens invading Dakar in 2244. This collection encapsulates her idea that each line of garments performs a story, with the narrative element and its message defining not only the style of the clothes, but the type of engagement the designer wishes to incite in her followers. On the occasion of the “Alien Cartoon” show, Kane staged an immersive experience, where actors dressed in her clothes animated a street performance that imagined an actual extraterrestrial encounter at Dakar’s old train station. The show involved tens of local artists, who built props to bring to life Kane’s African-futurist vision. The station was refitted to resemble a space of peaceful intermingling, where the set design and the styles worn by the performers translated in visual and material form the infinite possibilities of transhuman becoming. The characters navigating the futuristic space were costumed to resemble hybrids — their structured uniforms made of materials as different as tulle and PVC, and featuring digital prints of real and fantastic creatures, redefined the contours of bodies and their ability to move across and occupy space.

Holding the show at a venue that has symbolic power in Dakar’s collective memory, Kane focussed attention on the post-colonial body of the city and the invisible web of its non-linear history. Built in

24. Joanna Grabski, “Introduction to special issue: visual experience in Urban Africa,” *Africa Today*, Vol. 54.2 (2007): vi.

25. Carmilla Floyd, “Selly Raby Kane: The Selliest,” *Skewed*, October 27, 2020, <https://skewed.com/the-selliest/>.

1885 by order of general Louis Faidherbe, who defeated local resistance and extended French control to much of present-day Senegal, eventually becoming governor of the country, the old *gare de Dakar* manifested colonial order. Like other crossroads in the colonial transportation geography, it was instrumental to French actual and symbolic rule. Official narratives envisioned the newly-laid tracks as highways of progress, agents of modernization that would bring order to chaos. Train journeys held the promise of “wordliness,” redefining identities in relation to Western notions of mobility, freedom, and power. More so, they constrained fluid experiences of space and time, imposing a standardized model for making sense of movement and settlement, therefore affecting indigenous ways of being the world. Writing about railroad construction in the Sahara, Meryem-Bahia Arfaoui observes that its mythology of progress negated the social temporalities that predated colonization.<sup>26</sup> Transport infrastructure and the architecture and aesthetic of the crossroads, actively participated in effecting a colonial “chronopolitics,” whose linear temporal scale depended on the erasure of all other histories — ethnic, cultural, social, individual, collective.<sup>27</sup> Dakar’s train station was instrumental to enforcing a homogenous understanding of reality that positioned the city and its subjects on a global map organized around notions of distance and proximity to progress.

Kane’s African-futurist fashion show of 2014 was an attempt to reclaim a plural and situated perspective on the spaces and times of the Afropolis through the prism of fashion that, like transportation, was a tool of colonial control and anti-colonial resistance. It was meant to incite the live participation of people in a place that holds collective meaning, entangling the making of garments and art pieces with the making of new relations involving Dakarais of different backgrounds. In place of the self-enclosed environments that, according to Kane, determine Dakar’s social fragmentation and fragmented perceptions of itself, the time-bending framework of the “Alien Cartoon” show created the occasion to gather communities that would otherwise not mingle, bringing together people in an activity that re-defined their bond to this location, projecting them on a global scale, as news of the show reached international platforms, feeding an ongoing surge of Western interest in ‘African fashion.’<sup>28</sup> The event thus ascribed meaning to fashion-related activities beyond the message of economic transaction, prompting exchanges that allowed sustainable principles of social prosperity, community well-being, and resilience to be understood at a human scale. Like the more recent short films Kane wrote and directed, the show was an experiment in participatory knowing that incited collective cultural production to encourage mutual recognition and reciprocity. Participatory knowing is the notion that American scholar Rory Turner uses in his work on cultural sustainability.<sup>29</sup> According to Turner, sustainability has meaning and effect only when it is engaged as a mode of being in the world, when it attends to the cultural and phenomenological roots of being. Cultural sustainability acknowledges interrelationality as the basis of existence, and culture as the process by which we share together the collective goal of re-instating harmony and well-being across species inhabiting the Earth.

The actions described in this section articulate a reflection on unexplored possibilities of sharing the world with others, crafting visions of the future that foreground local knowledge and ways of being in the world, while preserving meaningful relationships with the environment. The prism of the fantastic aids Kane’s goal of using design as a tool to push beyond ready-made responses to the threats of the Anthropocene. As an internationally-recognized professional, she is aware of her participation in the global system of capitalist reproduction, which has made fashion into the existential threat that Niessen writes about.<sup>30</sup> But the way in which Kane acknowledges her positionality and responsibility *vis a vis* her invisibilized community is compelling. Her approach to fashion as a trigger of social engagement,

26. Meryem-Bahia Arfaoui, “Time and the Colonial State,” *The Funambulist*, June 21, 2021, <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/they-have-clocks-we-have-time/time-and-the-colonial-state>.

27. Arfaoui.

28. Fashion and decolonial scholar Erica de Greef contends that this is a contentious descriptor that does not reflect the plurality and difference expressed by the fashions from the continent. See Erica de Greef, “African Fashion, Postcolonial Narratives & Digital Access,” *You Tube*, July 17, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUT940mqSB4>.

29. Rory Turner, “Radical Critical Empathy and Cultural Sustainability,” in *Cultural Sustainabilities: Music, Media, Language, Advocacy*, ed. Timothy J. Cooley (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 32–42.

30. Niessen, “Fashion, Its Sacrifice Zone, and Sustainability.”



in particular, based on the mission of claiming space for the free expression of black Senegalese identity, indicates a desire to explore and possibly *explode* the unequal relations informing the structures of representation that bracket this expression, even as fashion is now celebrated as a space of self-assertion for most designers from the continent. It expresses social consciousness and has value for the message that inspires it. This practice encourages the kind of attentive looking that returns sustainability and its goals of just development to everyday life and the horizons of becoming of young black Africans. It translates fairness and equality — bywords of sustainable models originating in contexts from the global North that share little with their southern counterparts — into familiar language and the threat of an alien planet — climatically altered and suddenly unknown — into a trigger to enact an ethical regeneration.

## Practicing Visual Sustainability

As visual artists, Kofiga and Kane create meaningful representations of the complex socio-cultural geographies that they inhabit. As we have seen in the previous sections, their creative philosophy is informed by the goal of reclaiming creative freedom and formal autonomy to bring to life visions of inclusive, sustainable, and greener futures. Together with several other fashion creators from the continent, their work is hailed for bringing diversity and authenticity to the fashion imagination. Less is said about how their decolonial approach to formal composition bears on sustainable living, although both claim of relying on photography and visual art to rewire local perceptions of life in West Africa. Kofiga's project of visually documenting life at Kantamanto on Instagram and Kane's futuristic short films foster social wealth and positive self-assertion. In the spirit of "civic-minded communalism" typical of Senegalese street artists,<sup>31</sup> the latter believes that beautification through visual storytelling can shift perception and incite positive identification with one's surroundings.

The architectural notion of visual sustainability aids our discussion. Visual sustainability emphasizes the part that perceptions of form play in sustaining feelings of belonging and identification with the spaces that we inhabit. Urban theorist Pieter De Kock describes it as "the process by which people are sustained and enriched in daily life through the visual relationship they hold dear to their surroundings."<sup>32</sup> This notion places emphasis on the impact of expressive meaning on sociality and on environmentally-friendly behaviors. Visual meaning determines how we navigate the world, influencing our sense of subjectivity and sociality. De Kock contends that optical consumption — what we see and, most importantly, how we see it — mediates our sense of embeddedness in a place, determining quality of life. Visual markers to which we are intensely attracted are gravitational points directing us toward our goals. They are the elements that make up our subjective ontologies and are thus implicated in social behavior. A well-designed environment is one that tells us to pay attention and be caring towards it. When optical consumption is not nurtured, we go through the psychological and health effects that compromise social integrity and resilience, triggering the kind of chain-like systemic effects that have made the Anthropocene a major threat to planetary life. Sustainability is, in this anthropocentric framework, cultivated through "voluntary attentiveness," a concept De Kock borrows from Barbara Stafford to refer to mindful observation, a "long conscious [way of] looking" that creates the conditions of continuous improvement that enhance social wealth.<sup>33</sup>

This approach applies to Kofiga and Kane's work, which resignify beauty, work, and collective resilience as functions of a self-conscious relationship between body, dress, and place. Their style, performances, and the visual curation of their Instagram profiles incite attentive looking and immersion, hooking their audience in with the locales, "reaching for meaning beyond aesthetic preference."<sup>34</sup> This critical engage-

31. Leslie W. Rabine, "These walls belong to everybody': The graffiti art movement in Dakar," *African Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14.3 (2014): 95.

32. Pieter de Kock, "The Meaning in Seeing: Visual Sustainability in the Built Environment," *AMPS Proceedings Series 16*, Stevens Institute of Technology, (17–19 June 2019): unpaginated.

33. De Kock, "The Meaning in Seeing."

34. Pieter De Kock and Silvio Carta, "SDG18 Visual Sustainability: dream or reality?." (2020).

ment with the politics of clothing and Western notions of development inspires affirmative designs that require further theoretical unpacking.

## Conclusions

The two case studies described in this article express a critique of the global fashion system as an industry founded on a hierarchy of power that reproduces inequalities and a commerce-driven vision of sustainable fashion. They evidence a use of fashion animated by cultural context and aimed at driving socio-economic development and transformative change. We can call it culturally-reach fashion, or culturally-sustainable fashion. Kofiga and Kane mobilize culture as a mediating force that regulates and shapes development, harnessing growth to drive social cohesion. The brand of culturally-rich sustainable fashion they promote is place-conscious and place-responsive, driving individual and collective actions potentially leading to processes and communication of transformation and change. Culture-as-sustainable-development becomes an ongoing, in-the-making process rooted in social learning that maps complex negotiations of advancement, resilience, and interspecies prosperity, rather than providing solutions. In this approach, culture is a worldview guided by intentions, choices, motivations and values that make connections between people and their worlds. This integrating role is crucial in Southern contexts like Ghana and Senegal, where social and ethnic conflicts inherited by colonialism are a threat to social resilience and appreciation of diversity. Here sustainable development in fashion and other creative endeavors depends on setting the conditions to the enlarge human choices as the starting point to establish inter-species harmony.

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