Sculptural eyewear and *Cyberfemmes*: afrofuturist arts

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at forms of art and applied arts that straddle different times and cultural traditions and bring into view processes of African and African diasporic remaking of modes of seeing, looking and living in the continent from a futurist perspective. It shows how a combination of acts of self-representation and creative uses of waste and discarded objects may engender ways of seeing that reconfigure the world of the subject and of the watcher in a high-tech, afropolitan/afrofuturist direction, as in the innovative work of Kenyan artist Cyrus Kabiru. It also points to the creative ability of fashion design to produce imaginings of times ahead by locating the wearers – in this case women – in temporal frames that liberate them from the limitations of colonial/patriarchal traditions while also offering empowering links with the past, as in the productions of Senegalese fashion designer Oumou Sy. Afro-futurism is also the main conceptual framework of the Marvel film *Black Panther* (2018), about a utopian high-tech African kingdom and its super heroes and heroines. I argue that a relevant part of this diasporic production's success rests on fashion and the enabling role of Afrofuturist costumes for African women characters.

Keywords

contemporary African arts, Cyrus Kabiru, African fashion design, Oumou Sy, *Black Panther*, afropolitanism, afrofuturism

The implied method of this issue of *From the European South* is to work on the edges of the present, to see what is new or what is in view, and what forms of representation of Africa are coming to the surface in the 21st century and from a planetary perspective. In my intervention, I would like to start from a point Achille Mbembe makes in his essay "Africa in the new century," and elaborate on socio-cultural innovation and the role of artistic creativity in contemporary Africa. Mbembe states that the continent

is firmly writing itself within a new, de-centered but global, history of the arts […]. More and more, the term "Africa" itself tends to refer to a geo-aesthetic category. Africa being above all the body of a vast diaspora, it is by definition a body in motion, a de-territorialised body constituted in the crucible of various forms of migrancy. Its arts objects too, are above all objects in motion, coming straight out of a fluctuating imaginary. Such too, is African modernity – a migrant form of modernity, born out of overlapping genealogies, at the intersections of multiple encounters with multiple elsewheres. (2016)[1]

What this passage implies is that African art and its imaginary are deeply hybrid, mixed by nature and by history, and that if we observe them closely, our preconceived ideas of Africa

change, particularly if we look at the forms and contents of graphic art, painting, sculpture, cinema, music, etc. Observing, seeing, watching, scanning the horizons in which people live is, at the same time, the endeavour of the sociologist, the philosopher, the politician, the historian, the art critic, and of the artists themselves, who are at the centre of the present survey.

Art that changes how you see

"I don't see trash as junk," Kenyan artist Cyrus Kabiru said in a 2013 TED talk: "I believe in giving trash a second chance" (2017). The American people who attended the show, in which Kabiru spoke about his artistic vision, laughed loudly as if at a joke, but Kabiru was serious. In an early interview, when asked whether in his work he thinks much about the urgent problem of waste and reuse, or whether he sees junk simply as free material for the artist, Kabiru answered that the place where he grew up

faced the Nairobi dump site. All the trash, all the waste of Nairobi, used to be dumped in my neighbour-hood. So whenever I woke up, the first thing I saw was garbage. I used to tell my dad I would like to give trash a second chance. I would like to work with trash. And that's why, up to now, that's what I've done. (Kabiru 2013)

In Africa there is nothing new about young people collecting garbage and fashioning art out of waste. You see them all over the continent, selling their colourful artefacts at street corners and in local markets. What possibly marks a difference between most of them and Cyrus Kabiru is his explicit search for beauty, survival and renewal in chaos, pollution and death – the end of the life of objects, of humans, as well as of our globally endangered environment.
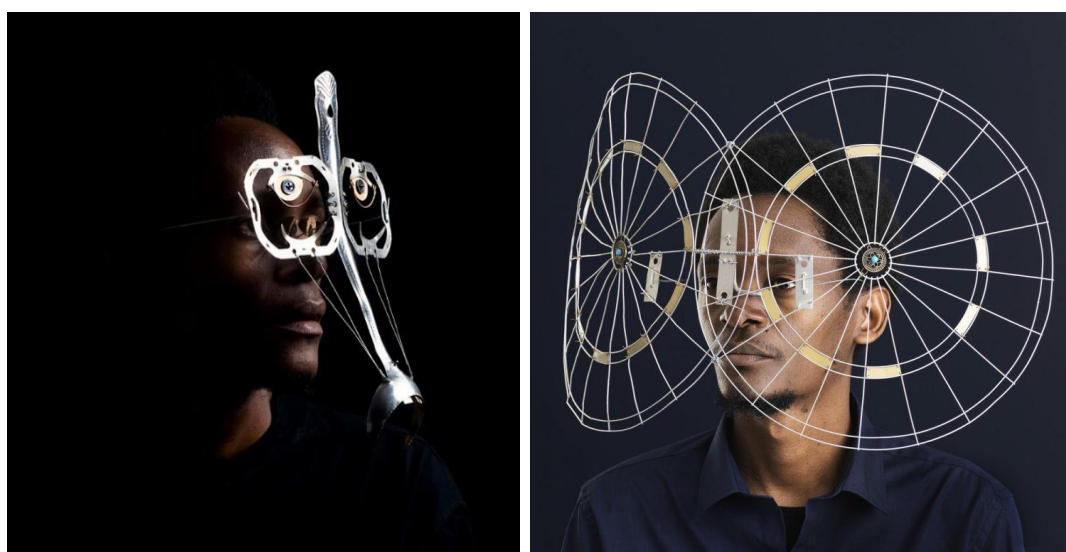
Works from the C-STUNNER Series © Cyrus Kabiru. Courtesy of the artist.

A self-taught painter and sculptor, today Kabiru is an internationally recognised artist, who practices in Nairobi and exhibits all over the world. His sculptural work, in particular, relies on

his role as a 'collector' of Nairobi cast offs. He fashions and refashions waste, recycled and found materials, into futuristic forms, and is perhaps best known for his C-STUNNERS, where (he says) 'C' stands for the artist's name, Cyrus, and 'STUNNERS' signifies "the way you are stunning. It's like 'Wow'. It's like 'C-Wow'" ("i24 News Interview", 2019). His fantastic sculptural eyewear represents an ongoing project, in which he makes and wears bizarre spectacles created with items found in his surroundings, but coming from multiple 'elsewheres', such as discarded pieces of technological waste. The results are original combinations of aesthetic experimentation, fashion design, wearable art, performance and photography, which comment on self-representation through commodity objects.

Each of the C-STUNNERS has a story of its own and is part of a series: the prison series, the mask series, the dictator series, the irreverent 'boobs' series, the wild animal series… They send out timely cultural and political messages (against the widespread practice of poaching, for example; on the state of prisons in Kenya; or the many dictatorships of the continent in postcolonial times) and, more importantly, they counter the current function of Africa as the dumping ground of all sorts of waste coming from the global North: in this sense, Kabiru's retrieval and re-use of garbage becomes a truly political gesture, a rejection of the metonymic assimilation of the continent with trash. So we could think of his work as a form of artistic activism, combined with a special energy and playfulness that, he explains, effectively captures the sensibility and attitude of the youth generation in Nairobi.

Young woman trying on Kabiru's C-STUNNERS during an exhibition at the Kuona Trust in Hurligham, Nairobi. Credit Mutua Matheka.[2]

His C-STUNNERS have thus come to signify the aspirations of popular culture, and to reflect the ingenuity and the resourcefulness of people. More importantly, they portray the resilience, the adaptability and the transformability of the everyday. In sociological terms, 'transformability' is the capacity to create a fundamentally new system when ecological, economic, or social structures make the existing system untenable.[3] Kabiru's bifocals in fact provide a new filter, a fresh perspective onto the world, transforming the wearer not only in appearance but in mind frame as well. If, by giving discarded objects a second chance, he exploits the transformative

power of reuse and turns trash into art, at an abstract level his sculptural eyewear speaks of a different kind of transformation. The use of a pair of C-STUNNERS forces the wearer to see differently, reminding her/him how much a pair of glasses can narrow or focus one's vision, and thus determine one's view of the world.

According to the curators of the *Making Africa* exhibition at the Vitra Design Museum in Germany, the C-STUNNERS series "draws attention to the restrictive perspective from which Africa is usually looked at, tainted by prejudices that are far more difficult to put aside than a pair of glasses" (Making Africa, 2015). But Kabiru's imaginative reassembling of old stuff, coming from local and global places and markets, also sets Africa on the move – culturally, aesthetically, socially and temporally. In my view he performs an Afropolitan artistic practice, in the sense of the term 'Afropolitanism' elaborated in *Sortir de la grande nuit* (Mbembe 2010). Africa has always existed at the crossroads of different worlds, in what Mbembe defines as a slow and sometimes incoherent dance with signs that African people have hardly had the leisure to choose freely, but that they managed, somehow, to domesticate and put at their service.

La conscience de cette imbrication de l'ici et de l'ailleurs, la présence de l'ailleurs dans l'ici et vice versa, cette relativisation des racines et des appartenances primaires et cette manière d'embrasser, en toute connaissance de cause, l'étrange, l'étranger et le lointain, cette capacité de reconnaître sa face dans le visage de l'étranger et de valoriser les traces du lointain dans le proche, de domestiquer l'in-familier, de travailler avec ce qui a tout l'air des contraires – c'est cette sensibilité culturelle, historique et esthétique qu'indique bien le terme "afropolitanisme." (2010, 228-229)

"Afropolitanism," Mbembe writes, expresses "a cultural, historical, and aesthetic sensitivity" (2007, 28) to the complexities of belonging in Africa and in the world. It is well known that the term rose to popularity with Taiye Selasi's 2005 essay "Bye-Bye Babar," which describes 21st-century 'Afropolitans' as affluent, educated, mobile people: "They (read: we) are the Afropolitans – the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you" (2005). Selasi's list of Afropolitan spaces points to the key role that space plays in Afropolitanism and suggests links with Afrofuturism, which incorporates jazz aesthetics, technology, and centres of power.

Since then we have come to hear about different 'brands' of Afropolitanisms, not necessarily related to the elitist hip generation of the new African citizens of the world, and in the plural. But the most interesting feature underlining them all is that they claim the world for Africans, creating what Simon Gikandi calls "a new phenomenology of Africanness" (2011, 9). What is also interesting for the present discussion is that all these brands of Afropolitanism express awareness of the power of images and reject a global visual culture saturated with negative representations of blackness. Selasi argues that "[t]he media's portrayals (war, hunger) won't do" (2005), and Mbembe posits the rejection of victimhood as a key feature of this new way of being in the world (2007, 28-29).[4]

The audacious hybridity of the C-STUNNERS articulates this disposition: it speaks of closeness and distance, of the familiar and the alien, of the local and the planetary in the dumps and the streets of Nairobi, traversed and scanned by the collecting/assembling activity of the Kenyan artist. In fact, Kabiru's eyewear is the handicraft of a *bricoleur*, who makes use of whatever is available, working with second-hand materials, as well as with different 'archives' that can be found among the leftovers of various civilizations. This seemingly random endeavour is in part a reclamation of buried histories and in part a creation of forward-looking stories by means of a re-engineering of the discarded materials of the past.

The C-STUNNERS, made of objects that are identified and reclaimed not by their origins but by their potential, function as de-centred, mobile palimpsests of personal and communal narratives, of industrial articles coming from other continents, of poor environmental policies, ecological disasters and local political blindness in the context of the current neoliberal condition. What's more important, however, is that they gesture towards a future that needs to be brought into existence. From this viewpoint, Kabiru's wearable sculptures also represent a mode of artistic production in which the Afropolitan approach joins hands with Afrofuturism, a movement that combines black local cultures and identities with technology and sci-fi, and with the travelling cultures and politics of the African diaspora. His 'bricolaging' is a decidedly Afrofuturistic practice, which asserts the right to use whatever is at hand, to 'repurpose' trash, and to enter the technologically enhanced future without assimilation into a global monoculture. With his C-STUNNERS, Kabiru intercepts in a creative way the Afrofuturist philosophy of the remix: he literally 'sees' huge possibilities in remixing the discarded and the scattered, which gives his artistic creations a futuristic look and, also, a compelling sense of potential and of empowered vision.

Fashion that designs the future

There is a structural similarity between Afropolitanism and the aesthetic field of Afrofuturism. Both, as the award-winning writer and scholar Sofia Samatar notes, are "expressions of entitlement" (2017, 186). Afrofuturism is not a new phenomenon: it is an enduring, audacious cultural, artistic and political African-diasporic and, increasingly, African strategy of claiming the future in and through the arts, as a gesture with consequences for the present. This gesture expresses the intention to develop (self-)representations that may free black people form the subaltern, stereotyped identities imposed on them by the hegemonic logics of modernity. Afrofuturist artists reclaim African traditions as necessary parts of this process of becoming, and in so doing they extend their archives into the imagined, the not-yet. This black cultural experience of expansive freedom achieved through remixing sci-fi, ancient African cosmology, and magical realism has been underway since the middle of the 20th century.[5]

A central feature of Afrofuturism is a focus on the black body, and what it means to rearticulate the body that has been dissected, violated and made to perform, in the history of

modernity since the slave trade. The survival tactic of 'shape-shifting', of changing the body, its forms and looks, and of taking on 'alien' features, which can be found in African American cultural narratives and in the work of early African authors such as the Nigerian Amos Tutuola, occupies a key place in Afrofuturist creativity since the 1950s. More recently, a number of African American female artists have presented their pop star personas with uniquely Afrofuturist codes: a mixture of ancient African tradition and space-age technology, through which they have channelled a stylized alter-ego, a self-created shifting identity linked to the shifting shapes of their bodies and outfits. For example, the survival tactic of shape-shifting is central in the work of 'android' pop star Janelle Monáe, and Detroit artist Krista Franklin, whose 2007 collage work *SEED (The Book of Eve)* saw Franklin draw on the cover of Octavia Butler's novel *Wild Seed*, where the young female protagonist takes on powerful identities, such as a white man or a lion, to navigate a hostile world.

In sub-Saharan cultures, the social presentation of the body and the value assigned to clothes and ornaments have always been relevant. As noted by anthropologist Giovanna Parodi da Passano (2016), despite the prejudices about the frivolity of fashion and African immobility, many studies have highlighted the social protagonism of fabrics and the significance of forms and clothing practices to both social action and political systems within African realities. With their 'theatrical' power, clothes are able to express both the characteristics of a person and her belonging to a wider collective subject. The messages entrusted to textiles can be considered creative responses elaborated at key moments in the history of the continent, as when, for example, they convey political messages or exhibit the faces of charismatic leaders. In contemporary urban environments, fashion representations have become a rich form of communication: from formal portraiture to the visual arts, from calendars to photos shared via smartphone, they communicate the place, the heritage and the belonging. But also ex-centricity, hyperreal bodily performance, agency, and forward-looking innovation.

Ytasha Womack – filmmaker, futurist, and author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi Fantasy and Fantasy Culture* (2013) – explains that Afrofuturism offers a "highly intersectional" way of looking at possible futures or alternate realities through a black cultural lens. It is non-linear, fluid and feminist; it uses the black imagination to consider mysticism, metaphysics, identity and liberation; and, despite offering black folks a way to see themselves in a better future, it creatively blends the future, the past and the present. As a black woman, Womack states that Afrofuturism makes space for women in unprecedented ways: "Afrofuturism is […] a literal and figurative space for Black women to be themselves" (Womack 2013, 100-101). And Alondra Nelson, a pioneer of Afrofuturism, would call it a feminist movement (Womack 2013, 108).

Though an absolutely innovative gesture in terms of African aesthetic practices and gender politics, it is not surprising that Afrofuturism in Africa expressed itself early on in the work of women fashion designers. Fashion is a very serious matter in the continent, and it has

always provided useful keys to reading both its past and present. Afrofuturist design is adding future-oriented and shape-shifting modes of representation to this continental tradition.

Senegalese fashion designer Oumou Sy, undoubtedly the most famous fashion innovator from western Africa, produces fashion clothes that keep pushing the limits of creative and institutional forms, and can be considered brilliant examples of the fusion and simultaneous valorisation of local culture and cosmopolitanism. From her early days as a self-taught young woman, raised in a conservative Toucouleur Muslim family in St. Louis (an old trading and colonial city of coastal Senegal), in the past three decades Sy has become an internationally celebrated designer who works at the intersection of art, spectacle, and social space. Although her name is immediately associated with costume design and manufacture, her creative activity is marked by her collaborations with other African artists in multiple media, including cinema, theatre, music, and dance. This theatrical, performative inclination has actually become a signature of her designs of costumes, haute couture, jewellery, and accessories.

In the early 2000s, a visit to Oumou Sy's laboratory in Dakar gave me the opportunity not only of seeing how she worked to produce internationally appreciated and futuristic clothes starting from a local situation, but also of hearing about her ground-breaking career in fashion design and production. Growing up, Oumou Sy was denied an education and was expected to follow the traditional life patterns reserved for women. But she began designing and creating her own clothes at the age of five in order to avoid her tribe's custom of early marriage (at the age of nine). Sy recalls the help she got from her mother who, from within their conservative patriarchal environment, used profits from weaving commissions to buy her talented daughter a sewing machine. That was the beginning of an independent life, in which gender occupies a complex place, involving self-affirmation, transgression, and play. "I have always made my own way," she says. "And I have done so with dignity." By which she refers not only to her success in the fashion industry: her work supports internet cafes, clinics for street children, and free workshops where she trains young designers.[6]

A pioneer of Internet culture in Senegal, in the mid-1990s Sy founded the first cyber café in the centre of Dakar, Métissacana, which includes her boutique shop, a cultural centre, and a showroom for her fashion creations. 'Métissacana' is a Bambara French creole word meaning "the mixing of races and cultures (*metissage*) has arrived" – an apt name for a business that sums up Sy's creative project. Her designer creativity in fact makes use of materials from a variety of sources, ranging from urban garbage to highly sophisticated fabrics manufactured abroad. At the intersection of art, spectacle, and social space, Sy crafts Africa through multiple senses, images, textures, light, and shapes that clearly invoke and imagine the past and the future in a fraught dialogue. Her designs have often been photographed in the city streets of Dakar amid trash, wrecked cars, and minivans.

If Sy's creative attention is focused on the fast changing environment of the city, the place where she worked from, at the time of my visit, was on the outskirts of the busy capital

of Senegal: a house in the midst of a dry, sandy area, where everything looked minimal and not quite new.
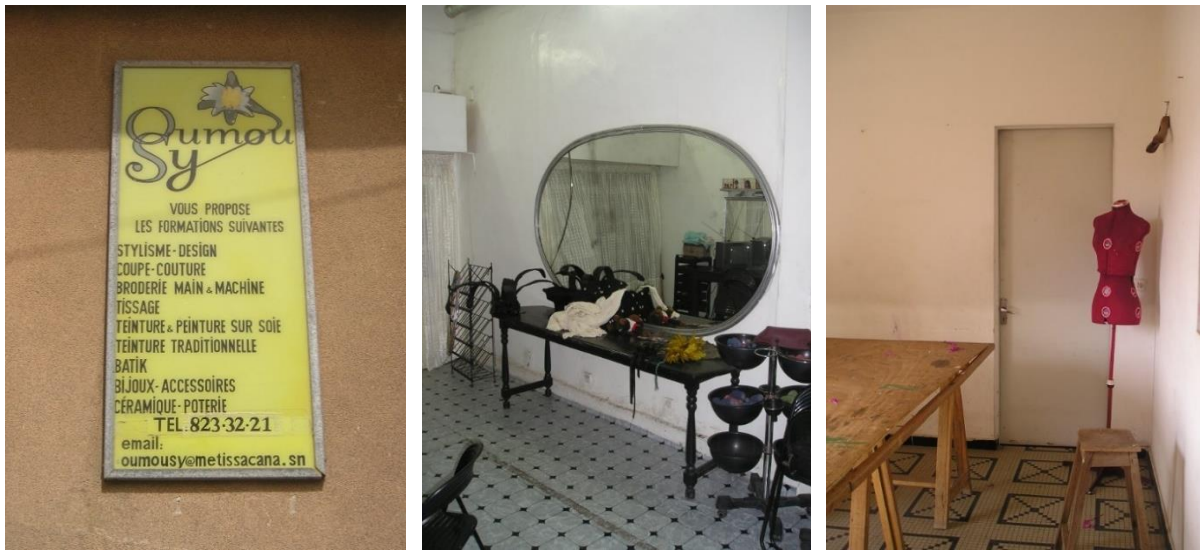
Oumou Sy's quarters on the outskirts of Dakar (my photos).

In her laboratory, weaving was carried out on ancient wooden textile frames, in the open air under a shade, while beadwork and sewing were performed on a table in the garden at the back of the building. The conjugation of ancient tools and techniques and forward-looking design was eerily striking but potent in its outcomes, signalling a conscious imaginative effort at renewing African materials and dressing codes in the continent and, also, internationally, as she increasingly broadened her distribution and reached the catwalk shows of Africa, Europe and beyond.


Weavers at Oumou Sy's quarters on the outskirts of Dakar (my photos).

In the 1990s Sy developed her signature collections of fantastic 'women' where tradition coexisted with new technologies, but also with the Dakar urban landscape of wealth and poverty, of glittering modernity and trash.
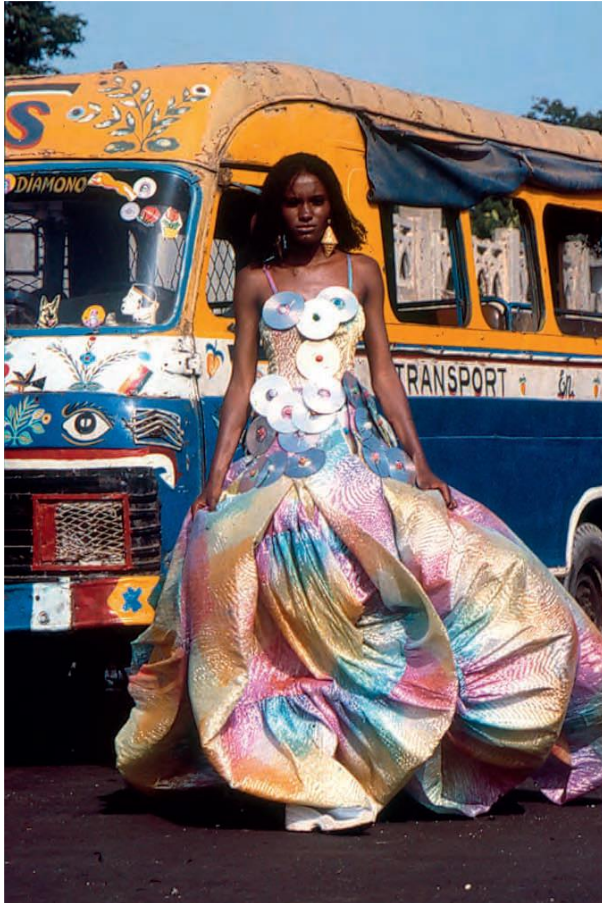
Oumou Sy, *Cyberfemme* (Cyber Woman). Dakar, 1996. Photograph by Mamadou Touré. Béhan.
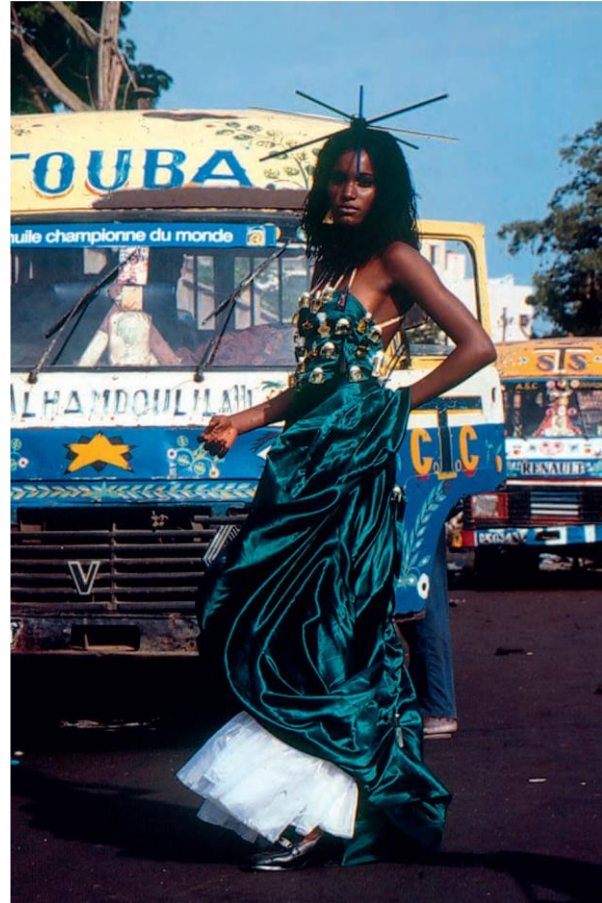
Oumou Sy, Perfume Woman, Dakar, 1997. Photograph by Mamadou Touré. Béhan.

As anthropologist Hudita Mustafa has observed, Sy combines a reclamation of African heritage with "a parodic rendition of modernity as Euro-African encounters, accommodations, and blunders" (2010, 123). Mamadou Touré's photo of *Cyberfemme* shows Sy's model posing next to a *car-rapide*, the cheap transport for popular sectors which rushes through the city streets and neighbourhoods: in the neglected cityscape of Dakar, she cuts a utopian figure of light, speed, and beauty, a sort of "cyber-angel" (123). Her almost magical apparition in the Medina of the 1990s is a reflection of a moment of instability and despair in the African postcolony, which, in Sy's artistic and social project, generates utopias and reinventions through images of subversive, mocking femininity. Cyber Woman is possibly the most famous example of Sy's aesthetic intervention, full of irony and mixed cultural references, which invites viewers to imagine Africa unbound from oppositions of Africa and the West, savage and civilized:

A goddess of modernity, barefoot and surefooted, she is far from the colonial ideal of the modern, civilized African. That was the male, suited bureaucrat, francophone and francophilic. Does she even need to speak French if she speaks Microsoft Word? She can access Paris, New York, and Abidjan via the Net, so does she need to go there? Does she need to be married? Who would dare marry her? (Mustafa 2010, 135)

If Cyber Woman uses iconic technological objects employed to polarize Africa and the West

as ornaments, Sy's Perfume Woman (1997) is a kind of playful but far from naïve historical and fashion palimpsest of Afro/European traces. The model in the picture wears a silk wrap skirt and halter top with small perfume bottles sewn on as if beadwork. Perfume, of course, is a mark of Parisian refinement and distinction, and therefore a symbol of French femininity, which Sy reworks by using imitations sold in local markets, as well as the small, cheap, very sweet perfumes from Mecca that are part of the sensory experience of Dakar. Perfume woman resembles a kind of walking catalogue of these still troubled intercontinental and continental relationships, transformed and possibly overcome by means of a headdress recalling a television antenna or a technological futuristic device.

Cyber Woman and Perfume Woman represent Sy's project of articulation of an Afropolitanism that mines the past and the present to produce a future which is in constant dialogue with origins, acknowledging and deconstructing them at the same time. Together with Kora Woman, Calabash Woman, and Envelope of the Desert (all created in 1998), her figures of femininity use excessive decoration of iconic objects to create human hybrids. Their garments are made of diverse kinds of cloth, mostly industrially produced in Europe and Asia, and adorned with items that include urban waste (as in Cyrus Kabiru's or Wangechi Mutu's work), gourds, baskets, and feathers.[7]

Today Oumou Sy's Afrofuturist refashioning of African clothes and tribal metal jewellery show a decisive turn in her modes of innovation of the past and the local, with an eye to the future and the planetary: her creations no longer signal the ironic desire to dialogue with the West and with western markets, by turning technology into fashionable add-ons. Instead, Sy works freely from within her culture and materials to renew them from the inside: by accommodating futuristic remixing trends, she neither renounces her matrix nor the desire to speak to the international world of fashion from her own Afropolitan environment. The future may still hold racial and neocapitalist tensions, but her creativity channels a new outlook on the self-mutating relationship between African women and their surroundings, blackness and hi-tech modernity.

Sy's fashion design – as well as the decidedly Afrofuturist creations of many younger African women stylists she has inspired – draws, cuts and sews the exciting landscape of an African contemporary time that is imagining its becoming, while still engaging in the long term socio-cultural process of women's empowerment. As such, her work could be thought of as dialoguing with African diasporic styles in the US and, I suggest, it could be seen as an antecedent to one of the most recent artistic achievements in African American arts and culture: Marvel Studios' Afrofuturist *Black Panther* (Academy Award 2019), where fashion design features as an integral and exciting part of director Ryan Coogler's success.

Black Panther is Marvel Studios' first movie with an almost entirely black cast and a black superhero. Although the story is based in fantasy, it is inspired by an earnest attempt to infuse it with concepts, cultures, and histories of/from Africa, turning the film into a platform for

collaborative work on the continent itself, which might provide some insight into its diversity while also promoting an inclusive sense of identity. As Mbembe noticed in an intervention occasioned by the screening of *Black Panther* in Johannesburg, the film rests on and blends the visionary ideas that in time have supported the Negro struggle for the liberation of black humanity. In his view, the film

est une extraordinaire synthèse de toutes les idées et des concepts qui, depuis au moins la fin du XIXe siècle, auront accompagné les luttes nègres en vue de la montée en humanité. Pour qui sait lire entre les images, pour qui sait écouter les rythmes et épouser le pouls du récit, les fils sont là, manifestes, et derrière l'une ou l'autre séquence planent mille ombres et mille courants de pensée – de Marcus Garvey à Cheikh Anta Diop, de la négritude à l'afrocentrisme, de l'afropolitanisme à l'afrofuturisme. C'est que ce film, sans doute le premier du genre, est d'abord une prouesse intellectuelle, la mise en image et en spectacle des grandes idées et courants de pensée qui auront accompagné nos efforts pour "sortir de la grande nuit." (Mbembe 2018)

The kingdom of Wakanda is a 'civilization' which has grafted a futuristic technological core on ancient traditions; a land that has never been colonized and has hidden from the world's view unfathomable riches and precious minerals, one of which, vibranium, is the key to its thriving society but also to power struggles inside and outside its carefully guarded boundaries. At its centre stands a king who is a new kind of egalitarian superhero, who would be lost if he had to rest on his strength alone: a powerful ruler who needs his family, his community and, particularly, the resourceful women around him. The women of Wakanda not only hold their own but, without their leadership and immense talent, the kingdom itself would be lost. The choice to encircle King T'Challa/Black Panther with so many dynamic women who have voice, political power and social recognition is intentional. Women in Africa are and have always been the heart of their communities: having dazzling black women on screen, respected for their intelligence, physical strength and wisdom in a world of male superheroes, is a forceful gesture in terms of race and gender politics.[8]

Lupita Nyong'o as Nakia and Letitia Wright as Shuri in *Black Panther*.
Credit Matt Kennedy/Marvel and Disney 2018.

I think the women characters in *Black Panther* may easily be seen as the 21st-century heirs of Oumou Sy's *Cyberfemme* – the prototype of an Afropolitan/Afrofuturist way of being woman in the maelstrom of temporal struggles that leads to her own and her community's wellbeing and development. Ruth E. Carter, the costume designer for the film, who is the first African American to have received an Oscar nomination, specifically created for *Black Panther* a combination of traditional African clothing with hi-tech Afropunk influences. She took several trips to Africa and drew inspiration from the Dogon people of West Africa, the Turkana people in East Africa, the Hemba people in Congo, the Suri tribe in Ethiopia, the Tuareg people in Western and Northern Africa, along with several others. The result is a scintillating hybrid attire that takes the trend inaugurated by Oumou Sy in western Africa to its extremes.

Shuri, T'Challa's little sister, has a special place in Carter's versatile fashion design, and rightly so, since she is at the same time a princess, a scientist, a nerd, a skilful advisor and a visionary politician. The sixteen-year-old girl is the smartest person in Wakanda and is responsible for most of the nation's advanced technology, including her brother's superhero outfit and the weapons he uses. Shuri is interested in innovations that directly improve lives beyond her own, and embodies a life project and a lesson in sustainability that men in the film find it difficult to share or absorb. By the end of *Black Panther*, however, T'Challa seems to embrace his smart sister's ethos, which leads to making sure that the Wakandans use their coveted resources responsibly and on a planetary scale. Shuri, the *Cyberfemme*, is the kind of game changer that Africa needs, not only for her technological skills, but for her generous political vision and her ability to envisage an equal society where women can guarantee peace and prosperity. Since its first release in 2018 *Black Panther* has largely been received and praised as a 'moment' towards racial empowerment and inclusivity. However, the most revolutionary statement in the film is that the future of Africa (and of the planet) rests on women. The future really depends on them.

Shuri (Letitia Wright) in *Black Panther*.
Credit Matt Kennedy/Marvel and Disney 2018.

Notes

[1] Mbembe's essay can be read online, in English and in Italian, on the website of *doppiozero*, a non-profit web magazine based in Milan: https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/why-africa/africa-in-new-century.

[2] For more pictures of the series, see Matheka 2010.

[3] "Its implications for sustainability science include changing the focus from seeking optimal states and the determinants of maximum sustainable yield, to resilience analysis, adaptive resource management, and adaptive governance" (Walker et. al. 2004, 2). See also M.C. Lavagnolo's article in the present issue.

[4] For an enlightening discussion of Afropolitanism and Afrofuturism see Samatar 2017.

[5] The term 'Afrofuturism' was conceived a quarter-century ago by author Mark Dery in his essay "Black to the Future," which looks at speculative fiction within the African diaspora and at the growing number of black artists using modern technology. He points out how blacks themselves were once used as a form of "technology." In slavery, exploitative systems of business and commerce viewed black bodies as machines that fuelled the power of Western modernity. Dery asks the questions driving the philosophy of Afrofuturism: Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? Furthermore, isn't the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers who have engineered our collective fantasies? What makes Afrofuturism significantly different from standard science fiction and space-art is that it is steeped in ancient African traditions and black identity and celebrates the uniqueness and innovation of black culture. The most famous proponent of this cultural movement was musician Sun Ra, who infused elements of space and jazz fusion in his work as a musical artist. Prolific science fiction author Octavia E. Butler explored black women protagonists in novels set in the context of futuristic technology and interactions with the supernatural.

[6] See "Designer Portrait Oumou SY" (2015).

[7] Spectacular photographs of Oumou Sy's Cyber Woman, Perfume Woman and Calabash Woman by Egyptian photographer Salwa Rashad can be found at "Stories in Costumes - Oumou Sy", visura.co/rashad/projects/stories-in-costumes-oumou-sy?status=Log+in+to+hire+Salwa.

[8] *Black Panther* has sparked a lively debate, particularly on issues of race and gender representation, in blogs, magazines and journals in the USA, Africa and Europe. South African scholar Carli Coetzee appropriately calls this enthusiastic response to the film "Wakanda fever" (2019).

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