It might not look like “African” dress to you (Figure 8.1). You may be expecting to see a richly embroidered Senegalese *boubou*, not a heap of gift wrap and a garbage pile of compact discs on a smiling model. But if you look closely you will see that this costume is indeed inspired by the aesthetic values of the *boubou*, the “traditional” dress of Islamic Africans. The multicolored taffeta in pinks, yellow, and white lends volume, motion, and shimmer like billowing damask robes. Like embroidery, the CD decoration follows the contours of embroidery around the neckline, down the gown’s center and also provides a headdress. This is “Cyberfemme” (Cyberwoman, 1996), the work of internationally acclaimed Senegalese costume and fashion designer Oumou Sy. Sy combines a reclamation of African heritage with a parodic rendition of modernity as Euro-African encounters, accommodations, and blunders. The photo presents Cyberfemme posing next to a *car-rapide*, the transport for popular sectors which is cheap, reckless, and criss-crosses throughout the city streets and neighborhoods. In the decaying cityscape of Dakar, she is a utopian figure of light, speed, and beauty, a kind of cyber-angel. In Senegambia, the moment of pageantry crystallizes a society’s political, aesthetic, and social values and hierarchies. Cyberfemme’s pageant through the Medina
navigates the unpredictability of social life and values. It is a part of a moment of instability and despair which generates utopias and reinventions through popular culture all over Africa. This is one example of how Sy’s partial narratives, aesthetic seduction, humor, and popular cultural references invite viewers to imagine Africa unbound from oppositions of Africa and the West, savage and civilized.

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 past and future in a fraught dialogue. Elegance is a traditional “Senegalese” quality and expresses personal and familial dignity. Sy has said that “Youth now don’t know where they are from or where they are going.” Her aim is that “Women of the future will be complete—outfit, accessories, everything.” Knowledge of one’s origins and personal beauty—not only exterior but, more importantly, interior—is key to this completion of the self. So, if Sy wishes to make a polished self, why is the decaying city the context, not only by necessity, but also chosen for her fashion photography, parades, and institution building? It is, I suggest, her masterful negotiation of the concrete artistic legacies of her Senegambian heritage and the more universal thematics in her work about the ironies and double-edged swords of civilized modernity, that make her appealing to numerous audiences, from European art audiences to young people throughout Dakar. She presents past and future, national hopes and failures, and Dakar’s urban image and reality. Costumes present past glories as well as subversive, mocking femininity such as Cyberfemme, in which icons used to polarize Africa and the West are used as decoration.

A Unique Agenda

Always pushing the limits of creative and institutional forms, Sy is an exemplar of the Senegalese fusion of, or simultaneous valorization of, authenticity and cosmopolitanism. A central, if heterodox, figure in Dakar’s elite cultural world, Sy remains rooted in her conservative background as a Muslim, Toucouleur woman from Northern Senegal. Her biography, accompanying all her shows and on her website, states that she is an autodidact in tailoring and was born in Podor, a town on the banks of the River Senegal. She openly declares her illiteracy in French, even as she eloquently comments upon her work in the colonial language. Hav-
ing begun in the Medina, her institutional projects and events bridge Plateau and Medina. These contemporary districts are legacies, respectively, of the French and African neighborhoods of colonial Dakar, and symbols of French and Lebou (Wolof) Dakar. In the last fifteen years she has collaborated with others in cinema and theater, and with musicians. In the mid-1990s, she founded schools of tailoring and modeling and an international African fashion week and popular carnival—both held several times in Dakar during the last decade. From a base in dyeing and tailoring for theater as well as for clients, Sy moved in the mid-1990s into more theatrical and experimental work. Now she produces costumes as well as haute couture in both clothing and jewelry. She continues to experiment with textile dyeing techniques and new industrial textiles. She is also a pioneer of Internet culture in Senegal with her founding of Metissacana, a cyber café, website, and marketing site for Senegalese fashion and arts.

Sy has won prestigious prizes such as the Prince Claus Fund’s 1998 prize, given to African fashion and shared with Alphadi of Niger and Adzedou of Ghana; the special prize of the City of Rome (2003); and Woman of the Millennium (Guinea, 2003). Additionally, her costumes have won prizes at the Pan-African Film festival (1993) and those of Milan (1993) and Johannesburg (1995). She was commissioned by the French government to design costumes for the Dakar celebration of the French revolution’s bicentennial. Her work has also been exhibited at several museums in Germany and is sold in boutiques in Paris and New York. In Europe she is exoticized, often called the queen of couture, pioneer, pinnacle of African fashion. Take one zealous author, writing in 2002 for an international nonprofit organization’s website:

The queen is enthroned on a small metal chair amidst a whirlwind of black and white, coming and going, pearl beads, dusty hairpieces, velvet thread . . . ringing mobile phones. She has at her disposal five tailors, four bead makers, two weavers, one embroiderer, and others, but in fact she rules an empire where the sun never sets—the realm of the imagination.

Sy’s current fame and success belie many years of dedication and struggle as a woman textile and costume artist in Dakar. In her own life, she speaks of her mother’s loyalty as she used profits from weaving commissions to buy her talented teenage daughter a sewing machine. With the help of Dakar artists like Ka-
lidou Sy, director of the School of Fine Arts, she launched her career in Dakar. We will see that the complex place of gender in Sy’s personal and creative narratives involves self-affirmation, transgression, and play. Before exploring the costumes we must consider Dakar as a historical and imagined site.

Beauty in the Ruins

It is not in stunning fashion shows and museums in Germany, Italy, and Senegal, but in Dakar’s postcolonial, globalized public spaces that the costumes’ spectacle magnifies. With ritual and sociality, even commodified as it is now, Dakaroises have always disrupted colonial frames for the city. The recuperation of the colonial city can be traced through the built environment of streets, houses, and walls made into a stage for spectacles of beauty as well as desperation. The ruined city paradoxically and endlessly generates incredible institutions and practices of creativity in fashion and image production. Designers look to streets, ceremonial events, television, and the designs of others in fashion magazines, photos, and, of course, cloth itself. If the ruins of colonial projects are evidenced in the unemployed, unstable middle class, the ruins of the colonial city are concretized in the deteriorating houses, broken pavements overrun with sandy soil, and the markets overrun by wooden extensions.

Having been nurtured by this adoptive city, Sy gives back. The archive of fashion events and photography which Sy has built with collaborating artists plays with this dynamic of ruins and spectacles. Photography documents her costumes in streets, next to old cars, and on the historic Ile de Gorée off the coast of Dakar (Figure 8.2). The Carnaval de Dakar festival, held several times in the last decade, is a gift to the people of Medina, where she has worked for decades. Medina was born of the forced removal of Lebou villages from the breezy, ocean cliffs of the Plateau district in order to establish colonial settlers. As the capital of French West Africa from 1902 until independence in 1960, Dakar was the principal African site of French investment and planning. Administration, railroads, universities, museums, and commerce were centered in this city, and they still are. In the late 1940s, efforts to produce modern workers, classes and cities converged in Dakar. Today, the segregated colonial city is displaced by a city saturated by transnational connections and strategies—a station for migrants to the United

*Intersecting Creativities*
States, a regional trade center, and a center of global African music and fashion and Pan-African tourism. Images are part of Dakar’s success and of its entanglement in global commodity and cultural hegemonies. It is simply not possible to walk in a street for ten minutes without encountering a tailor’s shop, a photographer or videotaped image, or a family ceremony in progress, filled with amateur cameramen looking for quick clients. Dakar’s specificity is its extraordinary human display of elegance and fashion, performed for the gaze of both other persons and of cameras.

_Cutur_ (Wolof for the field of tailoring as well as tailored clothing) expanded, I argue, due to a conjunction of crisis and transnationalism. With the acute financial and social crisis of neocolonial modernist institutions—schools, state bureaucracies—the white-collar labor market collapsed and so disempowered middle-class men. As patronage networks and strategies connected to state power have contracted, the Mouride Islamic brotherhood expanded from its rural base and has filled the vacuum. Its networks became the foundation of new urban classes based on transnational commerce and the informal sector. These classes are composed of “migrants,” so to speak, from former bureaucratic classes as well as smaller towns. In this context, urban middle-class women intervened in the informal sector to defend deteriorating class positions.

Fashion, with its mobile, versatile, and resonant materials and images, allows diverse designers and consumers to explore large, threatening issues of the devaluation of Africa in the colonial and global order of economic and cultural power. West Africa has a long heritage of cloth as currency, gift, artisanal tradition, symbol of power, medium of beauty and value. It is no wonder then that popular and elite fashion thrives despite economic and political crises throughout Africa. In fact, cloth and dress mediate crisis as sites of strategies for financial survival or social networking. Dress also serves to build public images of well-being amidst personal instability.

_Crafting Africa_

A nexus for multiple institutions and practices, cloth is a practical medium and metaphor for the making of modern Africa through colonial and global encounters of “tradition” and “modernity.” It creates alliances and bonds as a ritual gift.
In political life, dress displayed the charisma of kings, and now of presidents and marabouts (religious leaders). The production of cloth was at the heart of the social fabric: the service of weaving links noble and casted families of weavers. Cloth was key to undermining African economies and building European industries. It has always been a key trade item, and strips of cloth were used as money and could buy even slaves. Imperial spheres of circulation carried textiles and styles between Asia and Africa, as with Dutch wax. Cloth even figures a great deal in contemporary art with Yinka Shonibare, El Anatsui, Ghada Amer, Rachid Koraichi, Ike Ude, and others. Many people, even fashion scholars, believe that Africa has no fashion, only traditional dress. During the last decade, prizes and shows in Europe and Africa and attention by scholars, critics, artists, and designers make it impossible to relegate African fashion to the domains of traditional dress, custom, or material culture.

Sy’s pantheon of reckless goddesses delight, commemorate, and extend this history of dress as symbol of beauty, power, dignity, wealth, and history. They embody and provoke the senses and in so doing provoke an “Idea of Africa” which is grounded in material practices of creativity, not just elite discourses. Cy-

**FIGURE 8.3.** Oumou Sy arranging the Envelope of the Desert costume on Gorée Island, Senegal, 2000. The contrast between the n’dochette dress in damask and the Tuareg-inspired hard tin vest over skin is a reminder of the five-century history of Gorée as a site of encounter and center of trade, slavery, and creole culture. Photograph © Christophe LEPETIT/ www.christophelepetic.com.
berfemme, with her consorts Perfume Woman (1997), Kora Woman, Calabash Woman, and Envelope of the Desert (1998, Figure 8.3), is unbound from oppositions of tradition and modernity, savagery and civility. These figures of femininity (mostly created between 1996 and 1998), use excessive decoration of iconic objects to create human hybrids. They are made of diverse kinds of cloth, mostly industrially produced, European and Asian fabric—such as jerseys, taffeta, and silk. The objects include urban garbage of perfume bottles on Perfume Woman, a headdress of bouncing gourds on Calabash Woman, or even CDs, baskets, and feathers—adorning evening gowns (Figure 8.4).
Oumou Sy designed the historically inspired costumes Roi et Reines (Kings and Queens) in the mid-1990s. Refined artisanship provides the foundation of these costumes' primary elements of cloth and jewelry. These are not reproductions, Oumou insists, but inspirations based upon Senegambian, especially Wolof and Toucouleur, regal traditions of dress. She is inspired by African as well as Islamic forms such as the nhūbb (Wolof; French, houbuy, English, robe). Garment forms throughout her work—costume, couture, and prêt-à-porter (ready-made)—are characterized by simple stitching of long swatches of cloth that are layered and wrapped. Highly create decoration of cloth and body—with embroidery and jewelry—complete the sumptuous effect. Like all African designers, she innovates cloth traditions: first by using African cloth with Western styles; and second by working with master artisans to innovate (broadloom) weaving styles with mixtures of thread (such as silk, cotton, raffia, or linen). She also experiments with hand-dyeing of colors and motifs. Heavy woven wrappers made of strips of cloth are worn with simple tunics of the same or similar cloth. Stoles, heavy amber jewelry, hair jewelry, woolen wigs, and makeup complete the adornment. Dark hues define the natural cloth dyes and the black facial makeup on face, lips, and lined eyes.

Sy produces historical costumes for music and cinema as well. Diop Mambety's film Hyenas (1992) is a story of vengeance and the burden of the past. An old woman returns to her hometown to punish those who had cast her out when she was a pregnant young woman. Sy designed the costumes, which invoke cultural memory, recollections of personal dignity, displays of poverty and wealth. Yet this exterior beauty and wealth cannot render the protagonist whole. Finally, all players in the game of reckoning are destroyed. In this film we see how Sy works with sets—which she also designs; her neutral tones of garments fuse with the desert scenery to create visual effects of severity. Silhouettes of power build through volume and density with layering, wrapping, and veiling. Besides regal gravitas, her oeuvre also relies upon parody and surprise, humor and excess. For her closing fashion show at the internationally renowned Documenta art exhibit (2007), Sy presented both historical figures and fantastic costumes to great acclaim. In the St. Louis Festival parade (2008), she participated in this commemoration of St. Louis history as the first Senegalese city of both French colonialism and creole culture. Sy presented historical figures of French generals and signare, Euro-African women of coastal Senegal, that are icons of beauty that inspire Sy.

The Sahel Opera

Sy's sartorial rendering of historical imagination reached new heights in the ouvré which she produced for the Sahel Opera (2006). The opera engaged this classical form of Western culture to present the continuing Odyssey of Africa in world history. The narrative centers on the dilemma of a young mother to be. She is unmarried and takes the dangerous journey across the Sahara to Spain to seek a better life for her baby. Several men claim to be the father to benefit from the child's European citizenship. Still, under the irrevocable hold of home, she throws the baby back over the border fence. This gesture both enacts and is metaphor for the return to home and the necessity of Africa, as place of hope, not territory of siege. The creative process of the Opera itself was a form of institution building amidst the culturally rich but deeply impoverished Sahelian region of West Africa. The 85 performers came from across the Sahel and spoke their own languages.
and performed in their own traditions of music. The 150 costumes fuse traditions and were made in Dakar by Oumou Sy at a cost of US$30,000. The project was sponsored by the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development (Netherlands) and produced by the late Michel Mavros. Mavros was also Sy's manager. The project and its process present the particularities of cultural difference within the Sahel, and the global inequalities between Africa and Europe while presenting the universal story of the quest for a just, secure future.

The costumes also play with history, culture, and fantasy in new registers from earlier work. While languages and music remain distinct, costumes fuse traditions, often displaying dress forms in exaggerated size and density. The griot, iconic of Sahelian society, wears a brown 
\textit{bogolan} robe, a woolen wig with pompons, a large metal belt and a wisk, symbol of authority. He carries an unusually long kora (a twenty-one-string harp-lute) as tall as a man. While the female protagonist, Bintou Were, is dressed quite simply in a hand-dyed wrapper with a tunic and un-scared, un-coiffed hair, the female chorus of three young women is dressed sumptuously. They wear wrappers of Fulani strip cloth with geometric designs in ochre, rust, and black. This West African textile is supplemented by headdresses that resemble Southern African styles with \textit{kente} bands. Images of adorned femininity, they hold raffia fans, heavy amber beads decorate their necks, and they sport heavy plastic beads around their wrists. In another scene, these pan-West African objects cede to specifically Senegambian references. They wear indigo wrappers, but their headdresses are inspired mid-century hairstyles of the \textit{signares}. But these scarves, more like sculptures in their height and volume, are decorated with small African masks. Other costumes include Tuareg-style indigo \textit{boubous} and veils wrapped in Tuareg style, and gold and black Manjak wide-loom cloth \textit{boubous}. In sum, the Sahel Opera's costumes synthesize Sahelian textile traditions and ornamentation to accompany a narrative that presents both everyday poverty and extraordinary personal struggle.

\textbf{Figures of Femininity and Modernity}

Sy is inspired by Senegalese images and objects of femininity for her elaboration upon the experience of modernity and cultural encounter. One of Sy's designs,
Robe Kora, requires holding the kora, and so fusing body and dress to create one image, even performance. This is also transgressive because kora playing is a highly esteemed traditional male profession.

Calabash Woman sports a tight evening dress with a high slit and a crop of bouncing calabashes (gourds) as her headdress (see Figure 8.4). Calabashes are part of women’s daily kitchen life, as containers for rice to be cleaned or used to hold various condiments. They also represent rural Africa, simplicity, and poverty. Sy plays with this, saying, “Europeans think Africa is just too much, excess, and that’s what Calabash Woman is about”: the simple deployed in excess, a counterpoint to Cyberfemme.

The female version of Envelope of the Desert wears a sexy, split gown with warrior shields and make-up. She is a warrior-seductress, facing the urban jungle, a shield between the desert and city. There is also a male counterpart for Envelope of the Desert. Photographs of these figures, along with Cyberfemme, are set in dilapidated, if sensuous, urban spaces.

Cyberfemme is an image of subversive, mocking femininity—a taffeta pastel ball gown with CDs adorning the gown’s neck and front line as if they are embroidering on a boubou. 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?

The figure of Perfume Woman wears a slinky purple silk wrap skirt and halter top with small perfume bottles sewn on as if beadwork. Glass wands frame her bodice and face. Any Senegalese will tell you that scent is more important than anything else in matters of seduction. Women burn incense to cleanse the home and make it pleasurable, especially the bedroom. The final touch in fancy dress (sanse) is standing over an incense pot so that the fumes infuse the robes. The aroma of a passing dirriankhe (Senegalese, elegant woman) is one of the unforgettable experiences of Senegalese daily life. Perfume, of course, is also a symbol of Parisian refinement and distinction, and so a symbol of French femininity. It is a valued gift from abroad, and counterfeits are sold in markets. Small, cheap,
very sweet perfumes from Mecca—bought on pilgrimages or trade trips—are also important to this sensory aspect of beauty in Dakar. Perfume Woman coolly catalogues all of this.

Ideas of Africa are made and remade, fashion suggests, in material and immaterial ways. African scholars have deconstructed the “Idea of Africa” as a flawed invention of essentializing discourses of authenticity. These emerged from colonial discourses such as ethnology and religion, which undergird the fundamental hierarchical opposition of civilized Europe and the primitive. As mentioned earlier, this opposition in turn supports a series of Western cultural and intellectual categories and binaries—cold/hot, simple/complex, custom/civilization, tradition/modernity. Even simple distinctions like dress/fashion correlated with Africa and Europe are embedded in such a history. Nationalist and Pan-Africanist thought is also influenced by these flawed constructions of Africa. But identifications of themselves—and of certain objects or practices—as African holds great salience for African and diasporic peoples. Creative artists illuminate the compelling desires for necessary, ongoing practices of self-representation, of which a designation as African is part.

In conclusion, Sy is part of the continued, if changing, battles to redefine post-colonial African history and identity in local terms, as well as in a Pan-African context. Sy’s costumes, her tableaux of past and present—the Kings and Queens series or the series of Calabash Woman, Cyberfemme, and so on—lay out the palimpsest of Senegambian civilizations. They recall past glories, nostalgias perhaps, for kingdoms as well as the actual, ironic fruits of modern civilization. Sy is an artist, whose work brings the arts of cloth, clothing, and body adornment to parity with the fine arts, literature, and cinema in which the Senegalese excel. In effect, she places the rich and cherished Senegambian heritage of artisanship and body adornment into dialogue with the transnational terrain of the contemporary arts.

Her spectacular fashion shows are therefore not only visual and sensory feasts, but also a platform for the articulation of an Africanity which mines the past and present to produce a future that is in constant dialogue with origins. She exca-
vates traditions of bodily beauty that predate and survive colonial, capitalist modernity. Her work also blurs the boundaries between diverse artistic forms such as visual art, cinema, theater, and costume. In sum, while Sy's partial narratives, aesthetic seduction, and irreverent humor provoke re-imagining of oppositions of Africa and the West, savage and civilized, they also insist upon the materiality of origins and the necessity of the remaking of the African palimpsest once more.