

Book Review Forum

Jordanna Matlon, *A Man among Other Men: The Crisis of Black Masculinity in Racial Capitalism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9781501762864 (cloth); ISBN: 9781501762932 (paper); ISBN: 9781501762888 (ebook)

The grandfather founds the firm, the sons develop it, the grandsons destroy it.
(Popular Italian adage, cited in Yanagisako 2002: 109)

[F]irst, you work for another; then you work for yourself; and finally, others work for you.

(Étienne, informal street vendor, Abidjan, cited in Matlon 2022: 166)

Why is it that women's absent presence provides the periodizing structure to so many masculine allegories—*origin stories*, *melodramas*, and *developmental narratives*—constitutive of the urban plot?¹ What are we to make of the striking continuity in this mode of storytelling, across diverse historical geographies, that enacts the erasure of women's presence and labor (even while the intergenerational temporal structure of the form so often depends upon their mattering)? And then there is the question of the form itself. How does the shape of these urban allegories—*the rise and fall*, *curve*, or *upward trajectory*—disclose the specific structural conditions—*post-industrial decline* or *post-colonial arrested development*—succumbed to or threaded through an improbable exceptionality?

In my own research and writing on Phnom Penh, Cambodia, I have been captivated by the diverse creation allegories that structure patrimonial claims to the city. I have argued that when politically powerful men deploy these allegories, the effect is to erase the difficult practices and processes by which the urban poor rebuilt homes and negotiated a place in the city after

¹ On the question of narrative and its centrality to urban dispossession, see Ranganathan et al. (2023).

1979 (Collins 2021). In short, these allegories matter because they instantiate certain claims to belonging and ownership and dislodge others.

The first epigraph above, taken from Sylvia Yanagisako's (2002) classic study of the reproduction of heteropatriarchy in Como's family-owned silk firms, illuminates the multigenerational and genealogical expectation of masculine labor in capitalism as well as the anxieties that attend its fragility and portend its undoing. Contrast this expectation/anxiety couplet to those of Jordanna Matlon's interlocutor in the second epigraph above. There, Étienne periodizes the three stages in life as an impossible ideal, staged in three acts of self-actualization, but laments that this stagist path has been foreclosed in almost all contexts by the collapse of the Ivoirian miracle and the in-terminate interregnum of *la crise*. For the men at the center of Matlon's ethnography, patrimonial power and its rewards are doubly denied—cast out of waged labor they are “social juniors” that cannot claim the position of husband and father. Working outside of masculine ideals of the *évolué*, they disavow their labor and, in some cases, turn away from claiming their fatherly relation to existing children.

This turning away from what supports, nurtures oneself to live in the fantasy of the impossible is in some ways the post-colonial variant of what Lauren Berlant (2011) has theorized as “cruel optimism”—our attachment to and investment in the structures that harm us. The telos of a hetero-patriarchal ideal of the masculine bread winner is certainly one such structure. The economically precarious urban men in post-colonial Abidjan inhabit the interregnum of the temporary (Simone 2020). Yet, even while cast outside of normative developmental time, Matlon's interlocutors invoke an “against all odds” narrative of progress via free market development—arguing that Abidjan is on the cusp of economic development and bursting with entrepreneurial capacity. *Greatness is on the horizon*.

In *A Man among Other Men*, informality is diagnostic of a particular articulation of racial capitalism, Black masculinity, and development in crisis. This is a major contribution of the book. Matlon's ethnographic object is “Black masculinity in racial capitalism” (p.30). The book is a precise study of *global* ideological formations, cultural forms, and historical residues of uneven development in their imbricated force within a concrete lived urban space of the capital city of Abidjan's informal economy. The significance here for global urban studies is, to borrow

from Jennifer Robinson (2022), after several decades of studying informality as object, to rid informality of its exceptionality—pivoting informality to illuminate the underlying structuring feature of capital-intensive development, rather than stand as the object of inquiry itself.

A major contribution of the book to the field of global ethnography is its presentation of an analysis in which the central relational comparison is theoretical and rooted in one place in its complex relations with global elsewhere and heterotemporalities. Matlon’s method of analysis and mode of narration illuminates how relational comparison can divulge how a particular representational repertoire has been constituted through and in the friction between different ideological formations of empire and anti-blackness, as well as their hegemonic and counter-hegemonic representations (in this case the *évolué* and the media icon).² In *A Man among Other Men*, Matlon advances a Gramscian notion of coercion and consent as reciprocal rather than opposed categories, with implications simultaneously methodological and theoretical.

Rather than tracing a particular phenomenon and its unfolding across two or more sites, in Matlon’s text Abidjan is the place through which we encounter and engage two idioms of Black masculinity as they unfurl and intersect. Matlon argues that the political and representational economies of under-employed men in Abidjan emerge from the imbrication and contradictions internal to imagined ideals of the post-colonial *évolué* and the global Black media icon. These representational repertoires have a history, and this is the history Matlon traces in the first two sections of the book.

Building on the work of Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall, Matlon elaborates the moral economy and civil society as key terrain on which the construction of common sense and hegemonic idioms of masculinity are posed, revised, performed. The book explores how, in a time and place in which the post-colonial promise of formal employment, the wage, and the social contract had broken down, marginalized men make a life and make meaning of their lives—even while deprived the material means and opportunity to do so. The orators at an informal political space referred to as “the Sorbonne” and the mobile vendors who devote

² See also Hart (2018, 2023) for an extremely useful synthesis and discussion of different modes of relational and conjunctural analysis.

considerable time, energies, labor, and money to their self-styling as athletes and music artists, do so to puncture the tedium of what Matlon aptly frames as “survival etched in crisis” (p.170).

In a particularly impactful ethnographic detail, Matlon notes that in response to her query into how much they made in a day, vendors instead often referenced “the value of what they sold” (p.181). Here the value of the item indexes a certain “worth” irrespective of the profit margin to be gained from selling that item. This recalls Hall’s (1986: 24) famous maxim: the “global law of value ... ‘operates through and *because* of the culturally specific character of labour power’” (cited in Matlon 2022: 11). As another point of relational comparison, I am reminded of Janet Roitman’s (2005) ethnography of fiscal crisis in the Chad Basin in which she demonstrated that in times of crisis it was the units of measurement (rather than the price of an item) that shift. Thus, the cost of a unit of rice doesn’t go up—you just get less for rice your money (the measure itself changed), illuminating a subtle but crucial aspect of crisis in capitalism—if your wallet can’t absorb the burden of the moment, your body must. Those with means spend more in times of crisis; others make do with less or go without. Matlon’s work extends this, showing how commodity consumption and daily reproduction for her interlocutors are mediated by necessity, performativity, imaginary, and potentiality. In conditions of unrelenting crisis (Matlon adds) value is measured not by profit margin but by potential to greatness. By proximity to wealth and status—even as that proximity may put more distance between them and stable income. (Her interlocutors would rather sell expensive phones and make less than sell water and make more.) Worth or value becomes a signifier rather than something signified.

This speaks to the lively and contagious properties of the commodity as it can rub off on the vendor, and finds affinity with the work of another feminist ethnographer. Geographer Melissa Wright (2006) argued in her study of the gendered labor of maquiladora workers and their relationship to the masculine commodities they produced. Here residue of feminized labor (for example bits of nail polish) threatened to undermine the masculine value of the commodity. For street vendors in Abidjan, the feminized nature of petty trade threatens to undermine their masculine performances and thus they prefer to earn less by selling a more expensive commodity—“potentiality was prestige” (p.181). Where Wright demonstrated that the

feminization of labor in the making of masculine commodities made capitalists and their intermediaries nervous, Matlon adds that the embodied capitalism of marginalized urban men in Abidjan “relay[s] politics, poetics, beauty in complex articulations that sometimes-contested hegemonic capitalism but at many times broadened and expanded the same”.

I wish to close this review by returning once more to the developmental allegories which serve as epigraphs to this essay, to quarry what they disclose about the common-sense understandings of the world that are contested and those consolidated in the genealogical arc of these masculine origin stories. It is quite easy to overlook that, in fact, both allegories are left *ungendered*. Yanagisako (2002) is sanguine on this point: the Italian original of the opening epigraph could be translated in a gender-neutral way, she explains, yet she chose a gendered translation of the adage because her research made clear to her that it was grandfathers, sons, and grandsons that were being discussed. Similarly, Matlon’s interlocutor Étienne traces the normative and aspirational telos of the evolution from worker to owner to boss—in gender-neutral terms. Yet, Matlon’s ethnography shows unambiguously that this developmental allegory was that of the aspirational *masculine* post-colonial subject. Another of her interlocutors intones, “Here in Africa, here the vision of each human being is to have a child, a child to keep the name of his father...If you have no children you are forgotten” (Prospère, street vendor, cited in Matlon 2022: 239). Here Matlon elaborates, “normative measures of manhood as money to enable marriage and finally, children ... effectively sentenced the formal record of their familial lines to oblivion” (p.239).

Probing the arrangement and function of allegory, as it punctuates everyday lives, complex social worlds, and normative discourse, surfaces the historically resonant, relational geographies through which racial capitalism, the post-colonial status quo, normative masculinities and femininities get secured and reproduced as common sense and ideal, such that the erasure of women’s bodies, labor, and imaginaries can remain unspecified. Thus, the unmarked verbiage is a silence not an opening. Gender goes unspecified because the masculinity of the agentive subject is secure. By writing about (rather than filling in) the gaps, elisions, silences, and erasures of women’s and partner’s labor and care in Abidjan, Matlon, along with the many excellent feminist theorists cited here, powerfully casts the abandonment of racialized

populations and the erasure of women's work and care work as historical entanglements of (ongoing) articulations of empire, anti-blackness, and hetero-patriarchy.

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