

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)

In this theoretically and empirically rich book, Jordanna Matlon expands our understanding of racial capitalism through a focus on the social, cultural, and material relations of hegemony and consent. She does this through archival and ethnographic research in the city of Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, known as the “Paris of West Africa”. Abidjan becomes an important site of urban Black masculinity for Black men, structurally left out of wage work. Her study of Abidjan, historicizing the place and people from French colonialism to *la crise* (2011), allows her to trace relationships across the Black Atlantic, illuminating the global project of racial capitalism, structuring imaginations, desires, and aspirations.

I found so much richness and clarity in Matlon’s writing and connections to my own obsessions and those of some students I have had the pleasure of working with. For many scholars drawing on Cedric Robinson, Stuart Hall, and others we can understand the role of race as the primary mediator of capital accumulation. Matlon extends this work and helps us understand the ways in which race intersects gender to shape hegemony and consent. In doing so, she never assumes *a priori* identities as fixed categories, but instead studies how race and gender (Blackness and masculinity) are historically, geographically, and materially contingent. Matlon traces dominant ideas through French visual representations of the African colonies and Africans, but also shows us how such ideas are taken up, contested, and reproduced by Abidjanais themselves. I’ll spend the rest of this review focused on Matlon’s methodology and some theoretical implications of her work—specifically her focus on the lasting ideology of the wage for racial capitalism.

As someone who always feels like a geographer-wannabe coming from an oddball critical sociology program, I am always amazed by dominant geography’s relaxed relationship to methods. Geographers, and particularly students preparing for their dissertation work today,

might benefit from Matlon's methodologically insightful work. This book is historically and ethnographically rich, in ways that are attentive to structures as well as subjectivities and the relationship between them. To quote Matlon, she is "telling a story that is equal parts theory and history before finally arriving at—or rather, returning to—ethnography" (p.23), a reversal of her own research timeline. Racial capitalist hegemony is her ethnographic object, rather than the street vendors and orators, who she spends months interviewing and hanging out with, even recording songs with. To quote her again, "[t]his call transcends studying 'up' and 'one's own' to fundamentally rethink the ethnographic object itself. It is a call to substitute the object as persons or groups for that of the circuits and relations through which materialities and ideologies of sameness and difference travel" (p.24).

This move pushes past some of the violences of extractive and exploitative ethnography found across the humanistic social sciences, while allowing Matlon to trace racial capitalism culturally and materially. Matlon's postscript helps us understand why she structured the book in the way she did, and how her ethnography shaped the questions she developed. To simplify, her own race, class, citizenship status, and gender became malleable to her research assistants and others, shaped through ideas of Black masculinity. Through her work, we see there is not theory and history there and methodology here, but rather these are co-constitutive, again useful for all of us attempting ethnographic work.

Making capitalist hegemony her ethnographic object required Matlon to historicize what she saw unfolding in the present of her ethnography. So that, rather than flat "ideal types" created through the tropes of Black masculinity (*évolué* and media icon) she encountered through the lives of orators and vendors, she historicizes the production of such tropes through photos, correspondences, ads, films, and art, to argue that these anxious-ridden ideas and visualizations of Blackness were not inevitable nor ahistorical, but rather, in her words, "a consequence of the subjugation of Black bodies for economic gain" (p.77). Black masculinity takes different forms in colonial, postcolonial, and Bretton-Woods Côte d'Ivoire. Throughout both her historicization and ethnography, she is attentive to how such tropes are spatial projects. For instance, Blackness was constructed differently by the French in the metropole from the colony, and therefore new tropes were constantly produced to justify objectification, subjugation, and consumption. Yet,

lasting ideas of Blackness as “not quite/not white” (p.86) were historically contiguous, yet specific, and traversed the Atlantic. By paying attention to imaginations, shaped by shifts in political economy, Matlon shows how Blackness-as-other creates opportunities for consent to hierarchy as well as oppositional solidarities across the Black Atlantic. Black subjectivity may be structurally positioned as racial capitalism’s opposition, and yet, this is not the ontological truth of Blackness.

Throughout the text, Matlon centers Black masculinity’s long crisis under racial capitalism, through aspirations for and over an illusional wage. In this sense, she analyzes the ideological power of the wage, in a world where so few have access to it, structuring what she calls an “identity in contradiction” (p.7). Therefore, the wage retains ideological power shaping desires and aspirations despite the reality of its unattainable past, present, and future for Black men in Abidjan. Matlon outlines why this matters in her conclusion:

Like the sapeurs, the Sorbonne orators, and the aspiring musicians and footballers across Abidjan’s periphery, the growing multitudes of humanity rendered surplus will continue to innovate themselves and to practice forms of sociality that make meaning in and of their lives ... The question is then not *whether* life goes on, but of, qualitatively, *how*. What is at stake are the sudden catastrophes and the slow, immiserated deaths of the bottom billion, lives that pay the price without ever having reaped the rewards of the capitalocene. Life goes on, but in ever more degraded form. (p.239, 240)

Matlon resists an ahistorical celebration of the tropes of Black masculinity as simply oppositional or resistant survival strategies and instead places these men among the “growing multitudes”, the “bottom billion” living in the wake of racial capitalist onslaught. Here we might understand the role of consumption for racial capitalism, not only of material worlds but also of those in aspiration, that continue to shape places and people rendered surplus. For me, this provides historical and cultural depth to questions I’ve long wondered about in my own work—the longstanding power of the wage for people in places conceived of as structurally disposable, while the idea and significance of work (and for Marxists, class struggle in orthodox terms) has

long disappeared. By understanding how gender and race shape consent to racial capitalism, we might work against a racial capitalist hegemony that renders billions surplus.

On a final (and lighter) note, throughout the text, I can feel Matlon's care for the people at the center of her ethnographic work. She candidly shares the pains and pleasures of doing ethnographic work, beyond the postscript or a small "positionality" section. This might mean feverish joy after spending hours in a recording studio late into the night, as well as months and even years apart dependent on spotty WhatsApp calls across the Atlantic. Out of this methodological complexity Matlon provides theoretically rich interventions for those of us grappling with and seeking to undo the global project of racial capitalism.

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