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)

Being Somebody in the Post/Colonial City: Black Masculinity in the Hegemonic Order

Against the global retrenchment of a wage economy, a growing number of urban scholars and activists in the new century are thinking with the "right to the city", centering the livelihood struggles for social reproduction over the labor movements so characteristic of traditional class conflict. For the urban informally employed in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, right to the city struggles necessitate a perpetual hustle. Characterized by the term *se débrouiller*, these are mostly ephemeral strategies by which to make it through another day, to make do *despite*—what I call in my book, *A Man among Other Men: The Crisis of Black Masculinity in Racial Capitalism*, "survival etched in crisis" (p.170). Yet social reproduction is also about leaving something behind, a lineage that marks one's existence over and above the impermanence of everyday survival. In the African city, the wage—specifically the wage gendered as masculine—is an overdetermining colonial inheritance that continues to set the terms for *being in* and *being somebody in* the city.

Wage labor arrived on African shores as a colonial promise. Intimately linking race and gender in the image of the metropole, it promised African men incorporated into the regime the chance to become breadwinning patriarchs, masters of the public and private spheres of modern life. Appropriately masculine, the appropriate site of struggle, the salary or nothing: to material deprivation is then ideological aspiration, maintaining a fictive, singular vision of how lives ought to be lived even when this vision occludes agitating for improved livelihood on other grounds. The tension between reality and aspiration structures the dilemma of hegemony and consent that I outline among underemployed Abidjanais men and Black men within a global system of racial capitalism generally. It is this dilemma that my brilliant interlocutors engage as they variously elucidate on the significance of hegemony, gender, and racialized representational

repertoires in Abidjan and beyond that I explore in *A Man among Other Men*. I am both honored to have this conversation and grateful for the opportunity they have given me to extend some of my book's insights as I think with them.

The politics of gender is elusive. Despite being rooted in a very real and relatively recent colonial past, the dignity of the working man achieves the allure of incontestable aspiration. Thus, even as a politics of race battles for the inclusion of racially marginalized men, agitating for more work and better jobs—the signal of a new dawn on the horizon, a restorative masculinity—somehow the politics of gender, in which the vanishing point of manhood is marked by the absence of work, too often manages to remain *a*political in these debates.[1] I argue that that incontestable allure of patriarchal entitlement via the wage economy, what Erin Collins (this forum) describes as "attachment to and investment in the structures that harm", powerfully illustrates a Gramscian "common sense": it is how the social order appears natural when in fact directly anchored in an oppressive political economy. In other words, the colonial invention of breadwinning that has always largely excluded Black men is reinscribed as natural aspiration within a political economy of patriarchy. Malini Ranganathan (this forum) thus emphasizes my point that accepting the terms of the gendered wage when it is overwhelmingly out of reach is to inhabit, in troubling continuity with the colonial refusal of Black manhood, the diminutive status of *garçon* (boy), while Carrie Freshour (this forum) remarks on my dissatisfaction with scholarship that satisfies itself with finding meaning within this suffocating liminality. I insist rather that this liminal state is intensely political, and in my book I seek to demonstrate how this predicament operates simultaneously along registers of race and gender.

In reading my interlocutors' remarks on the significance of gender hegemony, I was reminded of "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" in which Frank Wilderson contemplates "the black subject's incommensurability with the key categories of Gramscian theory" (2003: 225). In this provocative text Wilderson asks, how meaningless is hegemony in the total absence of consent—in the context of *unwaged* slavery rather than waged

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[1] This point relates to my engagement with Julie Kleinman's (2019) *Adventure Capital: Migration and the Making of an African Hub in Paris* in my 2020 *Antipode* review.

slavery? "Civil society's subaltern, the worker", Wilderson (2003: 238) declares, "is coded as waged, and wages are white". *Wages, however, are also masculine*. Considering how the wage is both racialized and gendered has crucial implications for thinking about hegemony and consent. My study of the wage in the colonial African city, where racial negation was not a fixed binary (slave versus free) but a stratified aspiration (forced laborer to *évolué*) demonstrates how consent among colonial subjects was forged precisely on the register of masculinity, the promise of patriarchy. My book's title, *A Man among Other Men*, taken from Frantz Fanon's (1967) *Black Skin, White Masks*, implies a vision of masculine fulfilment by which racially othered men might take their righteous place *as men*. In this vision, the right of patriarchy goes unchallenged. Explaining that the "way out was in", I write, "a privileged subset of African men gained liberty out of the sun and fields by way of complicity: the closer they approached the colonial state … the greater their rights and entitlements" (p.49, 41). Access, through a privileged subset of *évolué* ("evolved") manhood, was always restricted, an aspirational promise rather than an achievable reality for the racially excluded majority. This promise "deferred", Ranganathan observes, produces crisis as the "throughline of the book", a crisis on multiple levels, at whose center Black masculinity resides in perpetual crisis. Still, the promise was powerful.

Women, Collins observes, constitute an "absent presence" in this male-centered story of the post/colonial African city. As "normative masculinities and femininities get secured and reproduced as common sense and ideal", Collins poignantly argues, "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". While writing this book I contended with how so much of the dominant framing around work had "already subsumed masculinity into the construction of its normalized protagonist" (p.14); admittedly, my ethnographic account reproduced this silence. Yet the origins of women's absent presence in the post/colonial African city is the other half of the story of the idealized male wage. The colonial preoccupation with conforming African gender roles to realize the metropolitan idea of the modern worker and nuclear family, the latter coupled to the former in what James Ferguson (1999: 169) has fittingly called a "parasitic, second-order modernity", aimed precisely at erasing the presence of women. The new urban labor regime, by alternatively

blocking women's entry into the money economy or denying the remunerative or public value of their labor, denied not only the significance but also the very existence of women's contributions.

A substantial body of scholarship on African urban labor as well as sexuality and gender relations has described how women's erasure in the labor market coincided with their erasure from the settler city altogether as the colonial regime envisioned for the most part a temporary African male labor force whose attachments to family and community would return them to village life. A later shift in colonial policy favoring a permanently urbanized workforce sought women, but narrowly and exclusively construed them as wives intended to support their working husbands in the confines of the domestic sphere. Ideologically and in practice kept out of productive roles in the money economy, African women in the post/colonial African city were thus rendered subject to and dependent on men, or more precisely, men-as-workers, from the start. This produced a lopsided gender dynamic that entangled male–female sexual, romantic, and economic relations. In tight economic times, the ideological stakes of the male wage heightened men's resentment towards the women for whom they could not fulfill breadwinning roles.[2] The empirics of this conundrum were apparent among Abidjan's vendors immersed in predominantly homosocial peer networks. Otherwise chronically single, they described abbreviated romantic experiences marked by women's unrelenting financial demands—to have their hair done, to buy them a dress for a major event—which they found unbearable with respect to their dismal earnings. However, as I probed men's stories about demanding women and sought to account for their household resources, it became clear that in practice, gender imbalances often tilted the other way. Women, single or in partnerships, in fact tended to be the steady providers.

The colonial legacy that reduced "work" to that which earned a salary in the modern, formal economy reduced men without such work to the status of social junior, while post-structural adjustment economic contraction further devastated male-designated work. Through it

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[2] Scholarship that has documented various aspects of the dynamics described in this paragraph includes Cooper 1996; Davis 2000; Ferguson 1999; Homaifar 2008; Hunter 2010; Mojola 2014; Newell 2012; Stoebenau et al 2016.

all, women's work—thankless though consistent—remained relatively unscathed. Collins remarks upon how as "patrimonial power and its rewards are doubly denied", the Abidjanais men in my study would "disavow their labor and, in some cases, turn away from claiming their fatherly relation to existing children". Rejecting marriage and the burden of "legitimate" fatherhood, the irregular support men were able to provide translated into benevolent (by virtue of being unnecessary) acts. Marriage, on the other hand, would have regularized fatherhood, subjecting men to the stigma of failure as they imperfectly enacted this role. Regularity and informality, as the urban planning literature has well established, are not comfortable bedfellows (Roy 2005). Thus while the experience of material deprivation was generalized (not enough *good* jobs), stigma was distinctly masculine (not enough *men's* jobs). Of the former, a crisis of need; of the latter, a crisis of identity. Women's labor persists as the ever-present absence.

How the wage was to enable men to assert dominance in the public sphere of work and private sphere of the family was a decidedly heteronormative affair, one that described "the universe as articulated by the men I encountered" yet whose "silences … [spoke] loudly about the assumptions that pertain to the rigid, imperial formulation of masculine identity" (p.15). This heteronormative framing prompts Jonathan Silver (this forum) to ask "what spaces exist in Abidjan for the LGBTQI community in the city". My ethnographic findings reflected a social world bound by colonial exclusion. Whatever occurred in the intimate moments men shared among themselves, the men I spoke to in Abidjan expressed their personal desires and social striving within this heteronormative frame. Yet as Matthew Thomann's (2016) important research with Abidjan's "*travesti*" subcultures shows, attachments to ideas about modernity have remarkable staying power even among non-normative communities. Subverting accusations elsewhere in contemporary Africa that diverse sexual expression is the product of a deviant Westward turn (while ignoring how colonial notions of Victorian sexuality imposed themselves upon pre-colonial sexual fluidity on the continent), Thomann found that *travesties* map a "moral geography" of Abidjan according to spaces they identify as safe for their inhabitation and those that are violently homophobic. They cast these divisions under the rubric of the "modern", borrowing from prevalent nationalist discourse to oppose their own modern sexual liberation with the "unmodern, or even antimodern" figure of the "*Muslim, foreign, migrant*" (Thomann

2016: 429). These spaces directly mapped onto the moral geography of Ivoirian exceptionalism expressed by President Laurent Gbabgo's street orators in my study, who contrasted the cosmopolitanism of the supposedly-true Abidjanais with migrants whom they depicted as quintessentially unmodern and backward (see e.g. p.153).

Abidjan, as it emerged in the French colonial project and how it fomented a geopolitical landscape of value and exclusion, was vital for situating my analysis of Black masculinity in racial capitalism. To understand how men identified in the context of the masculine-affirming wage and its absence compelled, as Silver puts it, a "relational urbanism" in which I reach across time and space to show how the "making … [of Abidjan is] inherent to other places and peoples". In this analysis, of which Collins calls "global elsewhere and heterotemporalities", I redefined my ethnographic object, identifying the workings of hegemony by and through men's imaginaries and the representational repertoires that gave them form. In what Silver aptly terms the "embodied experience of racial capitalism", *évolué* and mass media tropes became a means of charting colonial legacies and Black Atlantic circulations, respectively, to the present-day lived experiences of Abidjan's street orators and mobile vendors. My analysis recognizes, in both my "historicization and ethnography", quoting Freshour, that "such tropes are spatial projects". Offering an account of racial capitalism as told through the material and social strivings of informally underemployed Abidjanais men therefore engages the specificity of Abidjan in its proximity to (and simultaneously, experiential exclusions from) *évolué* masculinity, rendering the city an ideal type for theorizing the breadwinner ideal. And just as *évolué* masculinity, in its formation and reverberations, extends well beyond Abidjan, connections among and between racial-colonial projects, what Rivke Jaffe (2012: 684) refers to as a "ghetto imaginary", articulate throughout the Black Atlantic world. I therefore insist that the reader attend to flows and operations of power rather than read my text as an interrogation of Abidjanais men themselves, men whose lives neither I nor any ethnographer could adequately capture in their complexity or fullness. To repeat, then, *A Man among Other Men* offers an account of racial capitalism as told through Abidjanais men's material and social strivings; their embodied experiences offer an entry point into charting a longer history and global articulation of powerful imaginaries.

Whereas the politics of gender is elusive, the politics of Blackness is spectacular. It is a politics of representation that shifts between negation and affirmation: responding to how colonizers and enslavers devalued Black humanity to justify their exploitation of Black labor, Black people and their allies have celebrated Blackness as a total cultural and political identity. "Blackness-as-other", Freshour reflects, "creates opportunities for consent to hierarchy as well as oppositional solidarities across the Black Atlantic". In the latter instance, Blackness appears to take on an ontological significance as an identity that *doubly* and *necessarily* counters Black devaluation and capitalist exploitation. Freshour and Ranganathan both emphasize this point in my analysis, in which I remark upon the delinking of Blackness from capitalist critique, of Blackness depoliticized in favor of individualizing narratives of Black excellence or rewriting resistance as a triumph of Black capitalism. This move, I argue, articulates a *hegemonic common sense reading of Blackness-as-commodity* as well as comfortably reinforces the *common sense of patriarchal entitlement* that, taken together, naturalizes if not glorifies a singular Black masculine striving via capitalist registers of worth, be it via breadwinning, consumerism, or commodification. Collins reflects that in the crisis, when "commodity consumption and daily reproduction" are both "mediated by necessity, performativity, imaginary, and potentiality", then "[w]orth or value becomes a signifier rather than something signified". Importantly, Freshour warns that "in the wake of racial capitalist onslaught", my findings offer lessons for how "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".

Freshour and Collins assert that my ethnographic approach, in which I take capitalist hegemony rather than men in Abidjan as my "ethnographic object" (p.24), makes significant methodological and theoretical contributions, with Freshour stating that "[t]his move pushes past some of the violences of extractive and exploitative ethnography" while allowing me "to trace racial capitalism culturally and materially". Freshour adds that in this approach "there is not theory and history there and methodology here, but rather these are co-constitutive". Indeed, through what Ranganathan refers to as an "auto-ethnographic look at gendered racial capitalism", understanding how I was situated in the field helped me think more deeply about legacies of power. Thus as I considered my own positionality as a mixed race, or *métisse* woman,

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I connected *métissage* to imperial accumulation, by which European–African liaisons often produced a class of local elites on the continent who facilitated the workings of empire (see p.246-247). This generated an altogether different race–power alignment than in the United States, my country of origin. There, where the reproduction of slave labor through Black women's wombs produced a typology of hypodescent, my Blackness went undisputed. Comprehending these legacies, I argue, were necessary not only for navigating relations in the field but also for theorizing the "disempowerments of empire's afterlife" (p.247) that contextualized some of the hostilities I encountered and refusals of solidarity.

Of such disempowerments, Silver remarks that the "anti-colonial politics aimed at France and simmering anger at its neo-colonialism or *Françafrique* in the post-independence period emerges throughout the text in a multitude of different expressions and forms", and lauds the insights on the ground that certainly contributed to my own "learning about racial capitalism and the neo-colonial order". It is true that in speeches and interviews, President Gbagbo's political propagandists, street orators from my study, provided nuanced and biting critiques of the neocolonial *Françafrique* pact. This pact had underwritten Côte d'Ivoire's initial decades of peace and prosperity, all the while robbing it of the political and material foundations for lasting wealth and security—an uncomfortable contradiction for a country in which citizens had long claimed Ivoirian exceptionalism based on proximity to *évolué* status. Thus amid civil war, Gbagbo's nationalists embraced autochthonous rhetoric that produced anew racial capitalist logics of exclusion, targeting not only the specter of the French *colon*, but also in very tangible and often-bloody ways regional migrants at the lowest tier of the social order. Reproducing an ethos of entitlement based on blood and soil prompted me to contend that "the *évolué* trope had survived unscathed" (p.172). So even as I would not dispute their oratorical brilliance, orators nevertheless took on troubling positions vis-à-vis their fellow Abidjanais that offered little hope for a movement from below. They were, in short, too human to be heroes.

Survival, etched in crisis (or privilege) is messy. To take seriously power as an object of analysis means understanding that that which appears to be resistance can in another reading be consent, or in still another instance manifest as oppression. It is precisely this multi-dimensionality, this contradiction, what Silver describes as "the always relational and open-

ended dialectic between the political-economic and the personal", that makes it impossible for the ethnographer to have the last word on the complexity or fullness of what makes an Abidjanais man—even less to claim him as her ethnographic "object". As I call for rethinking how and what we as ethnographers interrogate, "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), I aim to complicate a popular politics of allyship that mutes critique of those who figure as the protagonists of our analyses. Not only does such a politics feed the presumption that all those we study are victims—risking conflating any study of *problems* into a study of *people with problems* who then become *problem people*—it is reductive of the complexity of lived experience to presume a unidimensional power-oppression-resistance axis by which we may then seamlessly orient our own solidarities. Rather, by rooting our analyses in what Ranganathan calls "an intersectional political economy of race, class, and gender" (among others), we can identify and interrogate what Stuart Hall (1986: 26) describes as "contradictory forms of 'common sense'" (cited on p.12) that shape an imperfect humanity. Doing so will allow the scholar to be—without contradiction—both ally and critic.

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Jordanna Matlon

School of International Service

American University, Washington DC

and

Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse

Université Toulouse 1 Capitole

jcmatlon@american.edu