

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)

Black and *Garçon*: Formations of Race and Masculinity in Racial Capitalism

Every once in a while, a book comes along that significantly reorients the analytics of critical social science, taking scholars out of their comfort zones and provoking nuanced, unintuitive analyses of consent, power, and agency. This is one such book. *A Man among Other Men* is a transhistorical, ethnographic, and auto-ethnographic look at gendered racial capitalism in West Africa. It resonates in any context in which capital value has advanced through racial and gender hierarchies and norms, which is virtually everywhere. Across three major parts of the book—“Theorizing Black Masculinity in Racial Capitalism”; “Between Place and Imaginaries”; and “Imaginaries in a Crisis Abidjan”—Jordanna Matlon presents a challenge to easy pronouncements on Blackness. Perhaps my favorite summarizing sentence comes on p.65 in Chapter 3, where, drawing on Stuart Hall’s 1993 essay “What is this ‘Black’ in Black popular culture?”, Matlon says:

The risk of essentializing Blackness is that “we are tempted use ‘black’ as sufficient in itself to guarantee the progressive character of the politics we fight under the banner” (Hall 1993: 111). An identity devised by racial capitalism to differentiate and dehumanize, Blackness assumes a common sense location in opposition to capitalist exploitation. It is a logic by which the cause becomes the consequence—you are resistant because you are Black. *But that is only its potentiality, and not its unyielding, ontological truth.* (emphasis added)

The ontological truth that Matlon exposes through years of participant observation and visual and sonic sociology with and on male youth on the informal peripheries of Abidjan, Côte

d'Ivoire is that structures of colonial and racial capitalism recruit poor Black male subjects into projects that pathologize and exploit them, even as they commodify and glorify them. From the French colonial encounter of the late 19th and early 20th centuries to the ongoing economic recessions of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Black men are understood as never being enough.

On the one hand, by transposing the ideal of the breadwinning, heterosexual male from industrializing Europe to the African context, French colonizers upheld the superiority of the well-educated and upwardly mobile male (the *évolué* or “evolved”) as against the backwardness of the working poor. On the other hand, Blackness was always already positioned at the bottom of the civilizational ladder in European colonialism. Imperial economics were structured to extract maximum labor power and docility from working male subjects; thus, only the privileged African bureaucratic elite was allowed entry into *évolué* status. The net result, Matlon argues, is that the majority of Black Ivoirian men were set up to fail from the outset. Even when they succeeded, they fell short of European ideals. To compound matters, Côte d'Ivoire's neoliberal period dictated by structural adjustment policies (1980s-2000s) further eroded the employment opportunities and social standing of the working class, thereby widening the chasms between the economic elite and poor.

The throughline of the book is the theme of “crisis” (*la crise*)—crisis as embedded in the long history of colonial racial capitalism, crisis as how Black men are always imagined as deficient, crisis as a political-economic period heralding structural adjustment that adversely affected the poor, and crisis as the ongoing justification for outside development interventions. The fallout of the long crises of racial capitalism is a range of subaltern political practices in the contemporary African city, which ultimately, Matlon argues, only continue to position poor, informal men in positions of global and domestic capitalist subordination.

She attends to how the working man survives in Abidjan through a life of hustle (*se débrouiller* or “to get by, make do, fend for oneself”), informal vending in the *quartiers populaires* (informal neighborhoods), and political speechifying in the Sorbonne (part of the old colonial core) of Abidjan. She demonstrates that poor working-class men assert their identity through performing global symbols of Blackness emanating from African American hip-hop,

fashion, and sport cultures—ironically, also wrought by parallel structures of racial capitalism that at once dehumanized African-descendant enslaved peoples in the New World, while also commodifying Black male prowess in America. To get at how poor men embrace mass consumer culture, Matlon turns to a Gramscian analysis of how racial capitalism secures consent; how it recruits willing members into their own structural subordination, what she names as “complicit masculinity” (p.13). Her conclusion is that the forces of racial capitalism and their seductive imaginaries of worth and prestige combine to render poor jobless Abidjanais men always in a state of aspiration—never one of arrival. As forever *garçons* (boys), theirs is an adulthood deferred.

This is the finding of the book that is most difficult to digest—that Black masculinity is, in fact, a masculinity always marked by a socially and economically immature *jeunesse* (youth). Why, to be male and poor in Abidjan, does it mean that you are also a forever *garçon*? Because men can never actually be “men” in an economy in which there are no permanent jobs—in a historical context in which Black labor has always been infantilized and dehumanized. Matlon examines the figure of the forever *garçon* through barber shops and aspirational haircuts that mimic the hip hop music and fashion of the West. Her book showcases a series of images of barbershops in informal neighborhoods, arguing that these should be understood as vernacular representations of, and claims to, “masculine space”. She says:

In the context of *la crise*, *la jeunesse* was an extended purgatory encompassing the bulk of a man’s life. Subverting the colonial order that designated an African man a *garçon* (boy), Abidjanais vernacular appropriated “*garçon*” to imply mastery of the street. To say admiringly “*garçon*” was to assert a counternarrative for men unable to assume established notions of adulthood, elder, or big-man status within their networks. A *garçon* achieved social success absent in the credentials of *évolué* masculinity. (p.202-204)

Marginalized from the wage-labor economy and *évolué* status in Abidjan, young men operating barbershops perform their cultural and economic identity as *garçon* through carving out masculine space in the informal city, while also visually telegraphing imagined connections to

famous African American rappers such as Tupac Shakur and 50 Cent. The final result of this shared and global Blackness is that it “resignified manhood and made it accessible for those who, within the dominant socioeconomic purview, remained boys” (p.205). These are tough truths for those working on the global politics of Blackness and Black resistance. But Matlon’s book also points to how we need sharp analyses of power and resistance that are always rooted in an intersectional political economy of race, class, and gender.

Reference

Hall S (1993) What is this “Black” in Black popular culture? *Social Justice* 20(1/2):104-114

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