

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)

This landmark book reflects an intellectual journey encompassing significant fieldwork and reflection, ethical care and above all theoretical originality. Now with this publication we have the chance in long-form to enjoy and learn from Jordanna's scholarship that has previously appeared in shorter papers, or amid ongoing conversations in its making. Above all, the ability to weave together the theoretical and the ethnographic, the *longue durée* and the immediate/proximate is what stands out for me as the major achievement of the book. It offers a thought-provoking contribution to a series of debates currently illuminating the discipline on racial capitalism, Black geographies, neo-colonial relations, bodies, embodiment and labour, alongside historical and contemporary urbanisms of African cities.

Recent years have seen a resurgence of geographic scholarship that has centred this term of racial capitalism (Al-Bulushi 2022; Luke 2022; Pulido 2017). There are many entry points to think through this massive world transforming process that has structured and itself been restructured across space and time, scale and era. Jordanna situates her specific contribution through a city and its embodied experience even as it reaches out into broader themes and issues. This is developed through an original reading of racialization in a post/colonial city (and the crisis of colonial legacy/structural adjustment in which experiences in these urban spaces are produced). This framework is then mobilised through thinking about the ways in which Black men inhabit the city, bodies that make their own spaces amid uneasy, uncertain times. In setting out on this journey Jordanna advances emerging scholarship about the embodied experience of racial capitalism (see for instance Bhattacharyya 2018; Pulido 2016), the ways in which bodies are valued/de-valued, and how longer histories of oppression, ordering, labour, and resistance play out in varied ways through people's lives and experiences. And yet to achieve this aim is not an easy thing. Part of the success of this book is the comprehensive historical-geographical analysis of Black masculinity in the first part that is both textured and detailed, clear and concise. This writing

weaves together thinkers such as Hall, Robinson, Fanon, Mbembe, Gramsci, and Connell to establish an understanding of racial capitalism and how it has been (co)constituted through Black bodies, labour regimes, and the patriarchal relations that underpin the economic system in a former French colony.

The book then shifts to the everyday geographies, urbanisms, and inhabitations of the West African city of Abidjan. Speaking from this city in Côte d'Ivoire is important. As Cedric Robinson (2000: xii) wrote in *Black Marxism*, attention should be brought to bear on the “so-called periphery—to the colonial territories, marginalized colored people of the metropolitan centers of capital, and those Frantz Fanon identified as the ‘wretched of the earth’”. Abidjan, we discover, is an integral site in the histories of African–French relations and the wider making of the Black Atlantic. It is, to use Robinson’s vocabulary, a peripheral space that has the capacity to speak back to these ever-shifting, unstable networks of power and solidarity, contestation, and control.

It what follows I pick up a few themes that I found of particular interest in the book, or felt I wanted to hear more from Jordanna about, less as things that may have been lacking in the text and more as a series of open-ended questions that spin out of the ideas and experiences that constitute it.

In recent years the activities of the French military in the region, particularly across the Sahel (Guichaoua 2020) but also during moments of crisis in places such as Abidjan, alongside the ongoing financial impositions enabled through the CFA franc currency (Pigeaud and Samba Sylla, 2021) and the ever-present lingua franca, remind us of the neo-colonial order in this part of the world. What is often missing in accounts of these geo-political tensions and neo-colonial plays is the profound understanding and opposition that unfolds out on the streets of cities such as Abidjan. In our encounters with many of the protagonists of the book the reader can feel the fierce and visceral hostility to France that is articulated by many in Côte d'Ivoire. This is a recognition from those in the city and on street of what scholars such as Robinson (2000: 71) have noted as a relation in which “the destinies of African peoples have been profoundly affected by the development of economic structures and political institutions among European peoples”. 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. The

critique is really rather impressively articulated from interlocutors such as Lola who make clear the racial economic order in such stark terms and an understanding that is fascinating to read about. He says for instance:

The Europeans and Westerners, they say they are rich, but the minerals come from us, but all that they produce they sell back to us; everything they sell to us comes from us. They say they are the best-equipped countries, that they are big powers, that they are rich. But they are rich with our wealth, and we are poor with their poverty. (p.163)

It leaves us as readers wondering about the futures of the neo-colonial order given this widespread hostility and how and where *Françafrique* might proceed over the next few decades. Furthermore, one gets the sense that Jordanna's learning about racial capitalism and the neo-colonial order is not only to be attributed to a detailed and comprehensive understanding derived from visiting the library. Rather it appears also down to the intellectuals on the streets of Abidjan. The reader gets a real sense that the people Jordanna has spent time learning from, her research participants such as Lola, that they have played a significant part in this intellectual journey and analytical/political position. Here is an interesting but unsaid relation between the making of this book and the city it is situated in, about how the people of Abidjan might also have played back into the comprehensions of the scholar during the many conversations and interactions that are brought to life in the text. It feels like there is always a conversation taking place between the author and the people that crop up in the book.

Étienne, one of the orators, puts simply that "the one business that works is politics" (p.166). I found this perhaps the most vivid statement that demonstrated the dead ends that previous forms of getting on and getting by required including people that would have expected to become *évolués*. After finishing the book my attention immediately turned to speculating about how this politics has continued in the aftermath of the research. What is happening now on the streets and among the orators in contemporary Abidjan given the increasing hostility to France that has been boiling up in the region over 2023? A book must always find an ending, but I am interested in how Jordanna's analytical approach sets up the question of where the city is heading in terms of this dispensation, how its future(s) continue

to be made and remade through the politics of the street, and the potential of these politics to launch people into new opportunities, livelihoods, and relations.

As an urban geographer working across African cities, I found the book offered a bold and highly original approach to questions of urban inhabitation (Simone et al. 2023). Of particular interest is how Jordanna charts the ways in which the colonial city was gradually and then dramatically restructured in the post-colonial era. This proceeds in the city amid ongoing echoes and inscriptions across its socio-spatial geographies that continue to shape urban life. I am interested in how this mode of thinking developed in the book might critically work across the Francophone model of urban planning in other cities and the ways populations inhabit these spaces. As a visitor to Dakar, I know the Plateau is also a central place that figures greatly in the public life of this Senegalese city. Jordanna sets up Abidjan as a city that shares but is also inherently different to other cities with such Francophone planning traditions. This, we read, is particularly so in the post-colonial period through its close relation to France and the continued presence of many French, at least until *la crise*. How this urban political context shapes strategies of urban inhabitation as compared to Bamako, Dakar, or Niamey remains to be elaborated.

I found the array of places/spaces that crop up in the book fascinating in thinking about the making of a West African city. Abidjan is described in exquisite detail and Jordanna travels seamlessly through its diverse localities from Plateau to Sorbonne to Yopougon. We read about people such as Gueï, a migrant to the city, and his trips to purchase goods from Accra. We travel across the Atlantic to the US, to the metropole of Paris, and to European cities such as Brussels. These global urban geographies become integral to life stories and getting on in life. This ability to weave together these places is fascinating because it both centres and decentres Abidjan and demonstrates its making as a city as inherent to other places and peoples. This is an analysis that successfully deploys a relational urbanism lens and is arguably integral to scholarship on racial capitalism. Jordanna centres the question of whether we can as geographers ever understand a space/place such as Abidjan without this kind of work across the Atlantic, back to the metropole of Paris, in other African countries, etc.

I found that a stark binary is set up between the Anglo/Franco in the book. Jordanna gives a thorough and convincing interpretation of the ways in which Anglo-capitalism,

particularly that originating in the US, has come to offer ways to navigate around the strict structures of French imposed class, gender, and race relations in Abidjan. This sense of fondness for this type of capitalism seems to accelerate out of *la crise* for those hoping to make it as (or without hope of making it as) *évolué*, for the Young Patriots, and for others this transatlantic character is now part and parcel of their identity. It leaves me speculating and thinking about what this book might have looked like if it was written from a West African city that suffered British colonialism such as Accra or Lagos, and the divide that exists both in urban realities and in scholarship about how these cities function at the societal level. Furthermore, how might this book and its framework find ways to approach the notion of Black masculinity in other urban African contexts such as cities built on settler-colonial logics (e.g. Cape Town or Algiers), or Lusophone cities (e.g. Luanda or Maputo). Jordanna's theoretical originality clearly has a set of tools and orientations that can travel beyond Abidjan, despite its detailed examination of what is particular and local in this case.

As I finished the book, I found myself thinking somewhat about what spaces exist in Abidjan for the LGBTQI community in the city, given that we read little of it in the text. While the book is focused on exploring a certain type of Black masculinity, I also wondered about those that might be less included to hang out in the Plateau and remain less visible in public life. How might their interactions with the city and forms of inhabitation also be read through the exciting framework advanced in the book? It seems like an interesting analytical proposition to explore given the poisoned afterlives of colonial era laws/legislations, and the contemporary issues of homophobia. But I also suspect the ways these forms of urban inhabitation might subvert and offer forms of resistance outside the ongoing ways in which, as Jordanna writes, Black radicalism is co-opted and subdued by capitalism.

This book both addresses and problematises a critical political and analytical question for radical geographic scholarship on racial capitalism at an embodied level that is able to reach out into the *longue durée* of world making. Whereas much work has focused on one or the other of these scales of analysis, *A Man among Other Men* opens up a conversation between the two in ways that demonstrate the always relational and open-ended dialectic between the political-economic and the personal. It does so through centring everyday lives in the city and forms of urban inhabitation across these relations. It does so while

simultaneously demonstrating the centrality of the periphery in theory making, opening up new possibilities across a range of conversations in the discipline.

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