

Jordanna Matlon, *A Man among Other Men: The Crisis of Black Masculinity in Racial Capitalism*. Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press (hb US\$125 – 978 1 5017 6286 4; pb US\$29.95 – 978 1 5017 6293 2). 2022, 293 pp.

Jordanna Matlon's ethnographic work traces Black men's strategies and struggles in emulating colonial and postcolonial imaginaries/ideals and their subsequent shift towards emulating Black Atlantic media imaginaries/ideals. This crisis is alluded to against the backdrop of the global capitalist system's transition predominantly from economies of exploitation to economies of exclusion. In this book, Matlon tries to advance a theory of racial capitalism through a narration of Black men's strategies in either affirming or negating Blackness in different historical contexts, especially under the banner of varied politics of representation, while remaining complicit with a racial capitalist ethos and logic. The study draws from her ethnographic fieldwork in 2008–09 in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire – the model colony for francophone Africa. The book, broadly divided into three parts, reflects the author's consistent personal and scholarly engagement with the field, coupled with empirical analyses that are presented with a robust theoretical rigour.

Jordanna Matlon opens her argument with an analysis of a billboard in Abidjan, the capital and largest city of the West African country Côte d'Ivoire. The billboard, which portrays men standing together and cheering for a beer company of Irish origin, has an exquisite mixed linguistic expression. The advertisement reads '*il y a de la GREATNESS* (There is GREATNESS in each man)' (p. 2). Interestingly, the profession or trade of the man who holds the banner is conspicuously indiscernible. Matlon uses this advert as a prop to show how anglophone imaginaries are manifested in francophone Africa through a valorization of consumption and an elision of work identity, both (post)colonial ideals for Ivorian Black men. She elaborates on the role of France's civilizing mission (*mission civilisatrice*) in reproducing the colonial political economy through the production and classification of wage labour. Matlon presents this as the '*colon-as-évolué*' (p. 103). *Colon* refers to a Black man who embodies colonial work and cultural ethics. As a model, the *colon* is predicated on a work identity and a gendered role in the running of the family – that is, a male breadwinner with a salaried job in the colonial administration or economy. Colonized Black men were expected to emulate this waged labour *évolué* ('evolved' person) and acculture themselves to French social and cultural mores. Matlon calls this strategy, through which Black men try to narrow the racial distance, as negating Blackness. The *colon* model survived even three decades after Côte d'Ivoire's independence, as President Félix Houphouët-Boigny never severed economic ties with France.

In the chapter titled '*La crise*' (The crisis), Matlon describes the political and economic crisis in Côte d'Ivoire and establishes her theoretical premise before explicating her arguments in the ethnographic chapters in the third part of the book. As Ivorian society witnessed, achieving the French civilizational ideal (i.e. of the *colon* – the wage labour *évolué*) was structurally untenable; such goals were either only available to political and cultural elites or economically unviable for the Ivorian economy. The crisis that began in the 1980s, almost two decades after the political decolonization of Côte d'Ivoire, saw the entry of anglophone imaginaries into Ivorian youth culture. During the crisis (which lasted until the

early 2000s), Ivorian political as well as cultural spaces embraced the new politics of representation that affirmed Blackness as beauty and pride. Gbagbo, a political opponent of Houphouët-Boigny, the president of independent Côte d'Ivoire, embraced a Black Atlantic modernity that brought a new aspirational *évolué* and new ideals in its wake, such as a successful Black diaspora replete with athletes, musicians and entrepreneurs. This challenged French colonists who were civilizational gatekeepers of the country.

Matlon argues that, while the definition of *évolué* has changed, the need for the figure of the *évolué* has not. In explaining the crisis of the Black community, the author contends that political decolonization and anti-racial struggles that are focused on the dialectics of negating or affirming Blackness can never evolve into anti-racial-capitalist struggles. The focus of Matlon's ethnography is predominantly on two groups of men: first, mobile street vendors at Abidjan's city intersections; and second, orators and Gbagbo propagandists in Sorbonne, a kind of street parliament where the country's political and economic future is discussed. The former claim that their earnings from weekly sales are just 'weekend money' (p. 181) that is exhausted in their weekend amusements. They tend to jettison or hide their work identities while embracing and imitating Black Atlantic celebrity masculinities transmitted by media outlets. The second group, the orators of Sorbonne, propagandize entrepreneurial rhetoric and emulate an anglo-phone business mentality while decrying dependency on employment by the state, something largely associated with French colonialism and early postcolonial Côte d'Ivoire. In this concluding part of the book, Matlon broadly demonstrates the crisis of Black African men by elaborating on the ways in which these two groups contest their exclusion and indignity through imagining and aspiring to become either culture consumers or economic-political entrepreneurs.

In her attempt to connect Ivorian men's creative strategies and assertions of economic agency to the larger structures and politics of a racial capitalist world, Jordanna Matlon neglects to engage with recent ethnographies on the street economy of African cities or the literature on 'hustle economies', which deals with 'hustling' as a concrete conceptual category. The latter demonstrates hustling as a means through which marginalized African youth try to break away from the normative forms and categories of capitalist labour and consumption and the socio-cultural norms around a 'good job'. Despite this shortcoming, this book is a significant contribution to African youth studies and the literature on critical race studies, standing out in the wider scholarship for creatively knitting together larger themes of race, capitalism and colonialism through an insightful ethnography of Western African men.

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