

Il est garçon:
Marginal Abidjanais masculinity and the politics of representation¹

Jordanna Matlon
Postdoctoral research fellow
Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse (Toulouse School of Economics)

Abstract

Using barbershop signs in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, this paper explores images of idealized masculinities that reflect pervasive themes in the lives of marginal Abidjanais men. I argue that men engage in a politics of representation that stresses their likeness to icons from the African diaspora. Global, black and male—the images embody the desires and disappointments of marginal Abidjanais men. Global, the images indicate belonging to the world beyond Africa. Black, the images affirm racialized identities denigrated by colonial domination and mass media hegemony. Male, the images reflect the disproportionately gendered disempowerment that African men experience as a consequence of neoliberal restructuring. Marginal Abidjanais men’s relationship to the global economy having shifted from exploitative to excluded, the images suggest a consumption-oriented masculinity that connects them to global capitalism as consumers but not to their hoped-for families as providers.

Keywords: Africa/African Diaspora; Consumption; Masculinity; Neoliberalism; Politics of Representation; Urban Informality

¹ Published 2011 in *Poetics*, 39(5), 380-406. Please refer to the original publication for photos [“figures”] and supplementary photos.

1. Introduction

1.1. *Belonging: Africa and “elsewhere”*

Recent accounts of African marginality highlight a longing for elsewhere that arises out of comparing the self to a perceived other. The media offer marginal Africans a significant connection to the global, contrasting sharply with local realities: lowered living standards and decreased opportunities in social, political and economic life (Diouf, 2003). James Ferguson (2006), describing Africans’ heightened exposure to other ways of being while facing increasing exclusions, argues that such a disparity destroys their membership in an imagined global community. He calls this “abjection.”² Brad Weiss (2009, pp. 115-116) uses fieldwork in Tanzanian barbershops to describe the “...juxtaposition of expansive potential and declining opportunities” as definitive of “these young men’s biographies.” His findings “illustrate that the dynamism and force of the global world constructed by these urban actors are clearly felt to lie *elsewhere*, and the crucial structuring principles and media of value that organize the world are inaccessible, even irrelevant, to life in Arusha” (Weiss, 2009, p. 127; emphasis added). In short, marginalized Africans see a better life beyond their reach. For Ferguson (1999), this indicates “expulsion” from the global and a corresponding crisis of meaning of ordering principles around modernity. For Weiss (2009, p. 32), the “margins” become “highly productive spaces” for the generation of popular culture and lived aspirations.³

² Like Judith Butler, Ferguson (1999) adapts this term from Julia Kristeva.

³ See Weiss (2009) for a discussion of his theoretical departures from Ferguson on belonging. He says that the “abject condition...is not simply a material circumstance with which African people’s practices contend,” emphasizing instead the productive potential of the abject’s position (Weiss, 2009, pp. 30-31). I argue that in his disagreement with Ferguson, Weiss conflates his *what*: cultural performance, with Ferguson’s *why*: social, political and economic disconnect, while not in fact making discordant arguments.

I argue that barbershop images in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire offer visual evidence of a vernacular among marginal men, an assertion I support with ethnographic fieldwork and interviews⁴ I conducted with men from Abidjan's informal sector while also referencing similar studies on contemporary urban Africa. Barbershop images create localized narratives that celebrate an Abidjanais-specific lifestyle and claim participation in the global political economy as black male actors. I suggest that these are direct responses to their marginalization, indeed exclusion, as productive members of Abidjanais society while simultaneously reflecting a history of Ivoirian "exceptionalism" (Boone, 1995). Marginal Abidjanais men engage in a politics of representation that stresses their likeness to icons from the African diaspora. This affiliation plays a redemptive role in their lives, for their consumption⁵ of global culture obscures their inadequacies in face-to-face social relations. These images represent expressions of masculinity that embody the desires and disappointments of marginalized Abidjanais men.

Like Ferguson (2006), I argue that "mimicry" relates centrally to "membership" in a global neoliberal order that excludes Africans. And I concur that the styles these men display in the barbershop signs are "modes of practical action in contemporary urban social life" (Ferguson, 1999, p. 221). However, I argue that this is an explicitly *gendered* practice. Though Ferguson acknowledges that his study of mine-workers was "inevitably a male-centered one" and that the "modernization story...is, after all, a gendered story" (Ferguson, 1999, p. 36), gender is not his

Borrowing from Frederick Cooper's (2005, p. 132) examination of the analytic category "modernity," to focus on the performances of marginal African men over their causes/consequences, while doubtlessly fascinating, "[looks] for multiple modernities [while missing] the importance and the tragedy of this story of possibilities opened and closed in a decolonizing world."

⁴ I conducted this research in French. Translations I provide are my own.

⁵ By "consumption" I refer primarily to the passive consumption of media forms, secondarily to the active consumption of consumer goods, and thirdly to participation in the consumer culture-laden worlds of music and sport.

analytical crux. Additionally—given Abidjan’s particularity as a regional center drawing immigrants from poorer neighboring countries and its postcolonial designator as the “Ivoirian miracle”—in my case, men contest their abjection with localized cultural affirmation. Côte d’Ivoire’s history also establishes a critical difference between my study and Weiss’s. While his discussion of the limited opportunities and insecurities of the Arushan informal sector closely approximates Abidjan’s, the historical divergence between Arusha and Abidjan, namely the latter’s sense of exceptionalism and proximity to the metropole, provides an important comparison to the relationship our respective African locales have to the signs’ content and hence to the global. Far from “conceding the deprivations” (Weiss, 2009, p. 45), the barbershop images I examine challenge them, suggesting membership through global participation.

I differ from Weiss in other ways. He says, “In contrast to prevailing views that see consumption as replacing production as a mode of value formation and as a social process more broadly, under global neoliberalism, I am interested in the ways these processes articulate in novel, popular configurations” (Weiss, 2009, p. 19). However, I stress that consumption-laden barbershop images are *responses* to neoliberal processes that exclude men from work-based identities; they relate men to capitalism without connecting men to women. As a *mode of value formation*, consumption replaces men’s productive identities as a mode of self-affirmation. But it is inadequate as a *social process* because it fails to secure men’s social statuses as men or to facilitate processes of social reproduction. Thus, I am as interested in what a sense of global belonging means for extra-local interconnectedness as I am in what its conditions of membership say about *intra-local disconnectedness*. So when men “[expel] women from urban sociality” (Weiss, 2009, p. 84) and declare that when women “exceed” men it is a “[sign] of the end of the world” (Weiss, 2009, p. 87), I suggest that men’s insistence on global membership and adoption

of global masculine forms compensate for their failures to assume the expected roles of men in their society. Hence the category of youth, which beyond having “no voice” (Weiss, 2009, p. 206), becomes a permanent category; I take the terms “young men” and “youth” not to be interchangeable categories as Weiss does, but the latter as a designator that denies men their manhoods. Similar to Nigerian “small boys” (Lindsay, 2003b) and Ashante “youngmen” in Ghana, youth refers to subordination (Obeng, 2003, p. 201). In this sense, “youth” is a social, not demographic, category designating unmarried and underemployed men (Newell, 2009).

1.2. Global, black and male

The images used to call men to the barbershop are global (the focus of Section 4), black (Section 5), and male (Section 6). The fixation that marginal Abidjanais men, not women, have with global media personalities relates to the particular exclusion of black men as producers and breadwinners as a consequence of global neoliberal restructuring. Excluded, marginal Abidjanais men seek to partake in the global economy; images of successful black celebrities offer another way to belong. Hence the *global* aspect of the icons celebrated in barbershop signs allows these men to identify with—belong to—the world beyond Africa.

The historical significance of the colonial project continues to resonate with deep connections between identities and rights. In African colonies, freely residing in urban environments was synonymous with citizenship (Mamdani, 1996). For colonized black men especially, articulations of citizenship, manhood and “what it means to be a full human being” were “deeply intertwined” (Ouzgane and Morell, 2005, p. 12). Inhabiting French colonial cities as citizens required assuming an identity that colonists considered sufficiently “evolved”: an identity close to that of the colonizer. The heritage of the *mission civilisatrice* and the powerful

impact of present-day hegemonic media sources strongly associate identities and rights in postcolonial cities; images of black men as full participants in the global political economy with unique approaches to an urban lifestyle respond to continuing domination. Therefore, celebrating the appearance of *blackness* is a significant move toward self-affirmation in the political battle toward representation.

Finally, related to global belonging, while indigenous African gender ideologies were not rigid, the double arrival of colonialism and capitalism inculcated enduring gender roles, expecting men to work for wages in the formal sector and generating a male breadwinner ideal.⁶ The colonizer used differential gender and domestic relations to distance himself from the colonized (Lindsay, 2003b, p. 78). Urban Africans since have distinguished between the “respectable” few capable of supporting their families with steady wages and the masses (Lindsay, 2003b, p. 7). Hailed as the model of successful French colonization, Abidjanais men were particularly inclined to embrace these categories in lieu of indigenous manifestations of masculinity that would call to mind “traditional” or village ways. Though the reality of African familial arrangements has always been far from meeting these “expectations of domesticity,” they nonetheless figure prominently in the African consciousness, such that “the failure of the myth of the nuclear family...signifies...a rupture not only with an ideologically conceived ‘normal family,’ but with an imagined modernity” (Ferguson, 1999, p. 177)—a point applying also to the male breadwinner ideology (Lindsay, 2003a, p. 150, 2003b).⁷ An oft-repeated theme in Abidjan is that a man’s worth is measured by his suit, air-conditioned office, and chauffeured

⁶ For example, see Lindsay and Miescher’s (2003) and Ouzgane and Morell’s (2005) edited volumes on masculinities in Africa.

⁷ Lindsay differentiates *discourses*, which created deeply rooted stereotypes and lasting ideals, from *practices* (2003b, pp. 105-132). The men whom I reference most closely approximate those “urban masses” far from attaining these ideals (Lindsay, 2003b, p. 204).

vehicle. While never a reality for the majority, Abidjanais pit this masculine ideal against women and migrant workers in the informal economy (Matlon, 2011).

Images that masculinize the cityscape provide visibility to men rendered redundant or invisible as underemployed, informal workers in Abidjan's economy (Matlon, 2011). Given the critical connection between work and manhood, I argue that "youth" and boyhood become fixed, extended categories within which these men find themselves alternatively venerated and disparaged. A consumption-oriented masculinity celebrates teenage culture for informal sector men who are not classifiable as (working, productive) men. This is then a failed masculinity—eternal boyhood—that connects them to global capitalism as consumers but not to their hoped-for families as providers. The emphasis on *men* in the signage celebrates a masculinity that may be achieved through consuming pop culture. It gives them both visibility and purpose in a city where, without work or wives, they lack full status as men. Before addressing the global, black and male in sections below, I first describe the context in which my fieldwork unfolded—Abidjan (Section 2) and its barbershops environs (Section 3).

2. Decadent Abidjan

With a seven percent growth rate for its first twenty years of independence, scholars and policy-makers dubbed Côte d'Ivoire the "Ivoirian miracle" (Zartman and Delgado, 1984). Its success was largely predicated on a close relationship to France—which acted as a steward of Ivoirian independence under President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who led from 1960 until his death in 1993. A fall in raw material prices and the introduction of structural adjustment policies in the 1980s, a coup d'état in 1999, and a civil war in 2002 precipitated the contemporary Ivoirian crisis. In 2008, Côte d'Ivoire ranked 166 out of 179 countries in the Human

Development Index (United Nations Development Program, 2008). However, Ivoirians continue to see themselves as a success in the African context and a regional magnet: more than a quarter of the population is foreign-born (Nyankawidermera and Zanou, 2001) and migrants make up fifty percent of Abidjan's population (Institute National de la Statistique, 2002). That others come to Abidjan searching for a better life offers tangible proof of continued Ivoirian exceptionalism. Newell (2009, p. 166) found that Abidjanais called their city "Yere City," or civilized. The Nouchi⁸ term *yere*, or "seeing," is directly contrasted to *gaou*—meaning "ignorant" and referring to those who were migrants, "undeveloped" or of "low value." But economic decline and political conflict have left Ivoirians severely constrained. The neoliberal generation contends with what it means to be Ivoirian from the perspective of the "miracle" and "crisis"—and independent of French social and cultural domination.

"Decadent" is an apt word to characterize Abidjan—Côte d'Ivoire's economic and cultural center and largest city with an estimated population of slightly over four million (United Nations Population Division, 2009).⁹ Decadence pertains to both the excessive indulgence the Ivoirian state lavished on Abidjan during its heyday, as well as to much of the city's current condition of disrepair. Minimal funds go into rehabilitating the roads that are regularly inundated during the annual rainy season; towering apartment complexes are stained and crumbling; putrid rubbish accumulates like added infrastructure; and the urban periphery constitutes the bulk of metropolitan Abidjan. It is in these slum-filled *communes*—maintained by the informal economy that employs an estimated seventy-five percent of the working population (Union Économique et Monétaire Ouest-Africaine, 2001-2002) and characterized by the improvised precariousness of

⁸ This is an Abidjanais dialect fusing French, local languages, and the occasional English word.

⁹ This number is likely much higher due to the significant amount of informal settlements in Abidjan, especially since the destabilization of the country's north after the 2002 civil war.

informal life—that I photographed the majority of these barbershop images in this article.

Yopougon and Abobo offered particularly colorful images. So outlying are these *communes* that neither makes it onto AbdouMaliq Simone's (2010, p. 200) map of Abidjan in his recent book on peripheral urbanism. Yopougon represents the nucleus of Abidjanais culture, and Abobo symbolizes the depth of its poverty.

Yopougon is somewhat built up—as I observed—with a scattering of multi-story office towers and intersecting paved roads. But it is largely characterized by unsigned, unnumbered neighborhoods of shanties, or *bidonvilles*. The Abidjan for Abidjanais, this *commune* is memorialized in Ivoirian Marguerite Abouet's *Aya de Yopougon* comic books, which keep domestic and expatriate Ivoirians smiling with accounts of life in the metropolis. As a burgeoning site of Ivoirian cultural production, Yopougon's *Rue de Princess* hosts a dizzying array of open-air bars—*maquis*—blasting Ivoirian music interspersed with hip-hop, neon signage, as well as adjacent food stalls tempting customers with succulent smells of grilling fish and chicken. On weekends, throngs of savvy Ivoirian party-seekers in their evening finest turn this thoroughfare into a pedestrian-only space.

Abobo figures as the target of derisory jokes about hard-knock Ivoirian urbanity. Abobo's many makeshift settlements make it the city's most populated though unaccounted for/undercounted *commune*. Roundabouts on Abobo's main road serve as heavily used public spaces where florescent puddles of urine, remnants of rotting fruit and the occasional lost sandal become breeding grounds for malarial mosquitoes. Here men can be seen relieving themselves freely within meters of women squatted on low footstools peddling wilting vegetables; vendors selling first world, second-hand clothing spread out on muddy tarps; and chickens pecking liberally at whatever nutritious refuse they find. Beyond the central paved roads—escapes out—

dusty dirt roads wander for miles, with large segments of Abobo beyond the official parameters of the city and thus unapologetically lacking basic amenities associated with urban life—including electricity, potable water, and sanitation services. Abobo is a hub for the poorest Ivoirians and neighboring country migrants, while clashes between them only adds noise to the many complaints going unheard on this outer periphery.

The legacy of pre- and postcolonial adherence to Francophone modes of sociality, the sense of Ivoirian exceptionalism and status at the “semi-periphery of the world-economy” (Mingst, 1988) remains pervasive to the Abidjanais identity.¹⁰ These factors rub against the visible and experiential realities of decline, placing Abidjan’s margins at the center of a tension between what Abidjan is purported to be within the region and what it is. It both allows dispossessed men to insist on their own centrality while also looking to cues from elsewhere in the absence of local affirmation.¹¹ The visual presentation of the cityscape via local art attests to the contradictions of a post-miracle Abidjan: surrounded by decay, these signs proudly claim that their city is at the forefront of African cultural production. This photograph of a barbershop decorated with American imagery, and children playing among refuse in the foreground, encapsulates such contradictions (Figure 1).

As glorified images of men in addition to global symbols of wealth—dollar signs, the American flag, the *Nike* swoosh, the *Lacoste* crocodile, to name a few—become fixtures of

¹⁰ The everyday men I reference are a mix of foreigners, migrants and Abidjan-born. However, much like the claim to be a “New Yorker,” the men I spoke to distinguished being “100% Abidjanais” from being Ivoirian.

¹¹ Sasha Newell makes similar observations about contemporary Abidjan. Perceiving Côte d’Ivoire as a “gateway” to modernity in Africa, Abidjanais in particular view their city as indicative of everything cosmopolitan and civilized about the country (Newell, 2009, p. 179). His discussion of *nouchi* identity that “derives its authority from the externality of modernity” (Newell, 2009, p. 172), in particular borrowing from American popular culture as an alternative to a Francophone identity, corroborates my argument.

street-level art in ubiquitous barbershop storefronts, men make claims on public space. Barbershops especially feature images of well-known, trend-setting men. These images are indicative of the manner urban dwellers choose to represent ideal masculinities from abroad—as in the case of American rapper, 50 Cent (Figure A2 in the online supplement)—and to articulate their own, as in the case of Ivoirian musician, Denko Denko (Figure A3 in the supplement).¹²

3. The barbershop sign as Abidjanais vernacular

Barbershop signs¹³ represent pervasive themes in peripheral Abidjan. They reflect the ways men confront their inadequacies, making meaning for themselves and their city. They situate their consumers in urban space and the imagined world of the sign itself. The signage draws on and domesticates imagery from throughout Africa and its diaspora. Representations of “elsewhere” are flattened, glorified and malleable; thus despite the likenesses, Abidjanais depictions depart from how a black American, Brazilian or Jamaican may choose to portray similar themes.

3. 1. The barbershop as a masculine space

While the mass of locally-produced signage throughout Abidjan’s periphery repeats the general themes I present here, I focus on barbershop images in this article for several reasons.

¹² Due to space constraints, only a portion of the photographs is offered in the pages of this article. All of the photographs are found in an online supplement, in full-size and in color.

¹³ Barbershop signs are a fixture of contemporary African urbanity. They have sparked the interest of scholars (Weiss, 2009) and art *aficionados*, appearing in gallery and museum exhibits throughout the United States and Europe. For a detailed study on the history and production of barbershop (and hairdresser) signs in Africa, and a more general exploration of the sign as a medium of contemporary African art, see Njegovanović-Ristić (2009) and Floor (2010), respectively.

First, the barbershop is a quintessentially masculine space in diverse contexts internationally.¹⁴ This has been especially dramatized in media portrayals of Black American popular culture that feature barbershops as places where men gather and exchange; consider, for example, the 2002 film *Barbershop* directed by Tim Story. Researchers have found rich potential in the barbershop as a site to study issues related to black American masculinity.¹⁵ My analysis nods to the barbershop's cultural significance in men's communities globally.

Within the informal sector, the barber's work ranks relatively high: barbers are their own bosses and have their own space. Given the informal sector's unpredictability, a place to where one may return daily with tools and products in place affords a modicum of stability (Weiss, 2009; see also Figure A4 in the online supplement). This leads to another point: among marginal populations, these spaces offer rare opportunities to exhibit one's socio-cultural affiliations and global awareness. Additionally, the popularity of using stylistically embellished and celebrity males in Abidjan barbershop advertisements, as throughout the African continent, is omnipresent and striking. These images provide a fixed framework from which to examine a masculinized cityscape more generally. Focusing on barbershops allows me to directly relate the significance of their symbolic themes to a place that men almost universally frequent.

3.2. Fieldwork on the urban periphery

For the above reasons, when I arrived to conduct fieldwork on unemployed Abidjanais men in 2008 and 2009, I selected barbershops as a primary site. I figured this would be an ideal

¹⁴ Signs often advertise *Homme, Dame, Enfant* ("Men, Women and Children"). This was more of a hopeful appeal than reality; on no occasion did I see or hear of a woman customer at a barbershop. In any case, barbers lacked the products to service a female clientele.

¹⁵ See as examples: Alexander (2003); Franklin (1985); Harris-Lacewell (2004); Wright II and Calhoun (2001).

place to find men out of work. In addition, I was consistently struck by the images of men on barbershop signs that were more flamboyant the deeper into the urban periphery I explored; barbershops in center-city *communes* such as Cocody and Plateau tended to plainly advertise their shops or commission formal printers instead of local artists.¹⁶ However, I found that instead of acting as a social nexus, haircuts in Abidjan were transient affairs and it was uncommon for men to linger with friends and clientele. Locals explained to me that the spaces were too cramped and uninviting. In fact, upscale clientele now preferred “*déplacement à domicile*”: to have barbers come cut their hair at home.

Instead, to reach this demographic with my questions in mind, I studied *vendeurs ambulants* (mobile street vendors), men whose time “hanging out” was spent on street corners and in between passing cars with the hopes of making some petty sell. What Abidjanais termed *chômeur*, or an unemployed man was in fact an underemployed man in the informal sector. Importantly, I learned that the informal economy sufficed as neither a source of pay nor of pride, hence their identification as *chômeur* despite putting in hours of tedious work under a hot sun. Moreover, informal activities were typically relegated to women’s work.¹⁷ Denied the masculine designator of “worker,” I looked elsewhere for men’s sources of self-affirmation, and I found them most often in personal consumption patterns, music production scenes, and a dense network of football teams throughout Abidjan’s periphery.

¹⁶ Producing signs such as these has become a trade, and the artists themselves were local men of the same demographic as their audience. For a portrait of an African sign painter, see Saidi (Weiss, 2009, pp. 101-104)

¹⁷ See also Agadjanian (2005), whose findings on street vendors in Maputo, Mozambique a decade earlier closely approximate my remarks about vendors and informal sector workers’ hierarchies and self identities. Lindsay (2003b) provides a detailed discussion of the established differentiation between men and women’s work in Nigeria’s colonial era, with market and informal activities relegated to a secondary category of non-wage earning, women’s activities.

But my conviction that these signs revealed much of what I wanted to convey theoretically and empirically in the worlds of the twenty- and thirty-something men I studied—every one of them unmarried for the same reason that they “lacked the means” and calling themselves “youth” despite their full range of ages—only grew with time. As I explored marginal men’s identities, the gulf between young men and women, and the ways men more readily appropriated a consumerist global culture—barbershop signs remained constant visual cues. My interest deepened when a friend explained to me that these images were almost always famous personalities; I had recognized many of the Western men, but what I taken for otherwise generic male models were in fact local media heroes.¹⁸

3.3. *Signs as vernacular*

For the above reasons, nearing the end of my fieldwork, I asked my research contacts to walk me around their neighborhoods to photograph the signs. In the same way that Abidjanais men adopted nicknames like “MC Black,” “Busta Rhymes” and “Boyz,” thereby aligning with a global black identity, the images I present here document a vernacular linking Abidjan to the African diaspora. However, when I would ask a barber why he chose a particular image to represent his shop, his standard response was a dismissive “I like his style” or “I like the way he does his business.” That said, many barbers did not choose the original placement of the image, but had recycled the sign from a previous owner. Well-preserved signs can last decades, though

¹⁸ I identified the media personalities on the signs, first, by asking the barber who it was (if he was around when I took the photo) and later, irrespective of whether the barber had designated a certain man, I asked Abidjanais friends and research subjects (totaling fourteen men). At times they disagreed on poorly replicated likenesses of non-Abidjanais artists; so in those cases, I went with the majority’s opinion. Even then, all the men were nonetheless convinced that this was a media icon, supporting my general argument around venerated media personas.

like many objects in sub-Saharan Africa, a second-hand or third-hand sign was used as long as it was still discernable; some signs I passed by were decrepit with the wood cracked off and the paint faded. But as McDonnell (2010, pp. 1838-1839) notes of hairdressers' and taxi drivers' use of AIDS campaign posters and stickers, respectively, they "rarely...[had] a cogent reason" beyond a "decorating aesthetic of availability." Most often, they replied that the images were "nice."

Instead of trying to find deeper meaning than "nice" or "just because"—see, for example, Ferguson's (1999, pp. 209-211) discussion of "Asia in miniature"—I emphasize that at some point along the course from imagination to production to display, marginal men have reached a consensus that certain motifs resonate with an Abidjanais sensibility. As a normative backdrop, beyond the personal choice of the barber or his client, the predilection for such images situated in Abidjan's peripheral *communes* clearly resonates with everyday men while also indicating their vision of an ideal-typical masculinity. I relate this to the fact that, despite dominating public space, marginal Abidjanais men are invisible, or at least insignificant, as actors in the public sphere: as community members, husbands and fathers, and as workers. The visibility of men who are integral parts of the global political economy, often as conspicuous consumers but always as renowned media personalities, I argue, is a response to Abidjanais men's own marginalization (Matlon, 2011; Weiss, 2009, p. 107). It is with this in mind that I interpret these images' significance for marginal Abidjanais masculinity.

4. Consenting consumers and global belonging

Man the hunter becomes a parasite. (Silberschmidt, 2005, p. 196)

The feminization of work has left marginal, un- and underemployed men globally with the painful predicament of how to define themselves vis-à-vis the women in their lives: as their connection to capitalism transforms from exploitation to exclusion, the crisis of work is also a crisis of masculinity. Instead of resisting an exploitative system, men now focus on the dilemma poised between exclusion and belonging: participation in a system of global capital while sidestepping their failure to participate as providers for their families (Matlon, 2010).

4.1. Belonging to a global politics of style

The barbershop signs use a shared set of global consumerist cues to indicate belonging among a community of men both locally and throughout the African diaspora. Africans' informalized worlds are discordant with notions of modernity and appropriate gender roles (Agadjanian, 2005; Ferguson, 2006). But with the help of mass advertising campaigns and a constant media onslaught, even minimal consumption capacities—a beer here, a pair of second-hand sneakers there—allow marginal men to engage with the global system. Hence, Weiss (2009, p. 52) garners how “the enactment of sociocultural values...can create a frame of action in which participants feel their claims have validity—in short, a world to which they belong.” For example, mobile phone advertisements proliferated throughout Abidjan, often patterned like music video stills with sexy women adorning a cool black man in a suit and flashy accessories. And phones are a man's must-have accessory. Jaurès,¹⁹ a twenty-five year-old mobile street vendor explained, “I love expensive phones, you know, *serious* phones. Because once you have this, people respect you, you see?” Romeo, a twenty-three year-old professional dancer, explained that in Côte d'Ivoire, it is hard to tell the difference between a vendor and a man with a

¹⁹ I have changed all names for the sake of anonymity.

well-paying job. Personal attention to style suggested, “You are not better than me. Look: I am wearing the same clothes as you.” Newell (2009) calls this practice the “bluff.”

Initial discourse on the postcolonial subject emphasized resistance to exploitation and freedom from dependency. But today, when so many men are rendered economically redundant, women are the new factory hands, targets of development projects and microcredit schemes. Men who make ends meet by entering typically female trades find their manhood at threat (Agadjanian, 2005). As to what this means for changing African gender roles, researchers have pointed to a range of potential and actual shifts, from suggesting that the male breadwinner model is now “losing saliency” (Lindsay, 2003b, p. 211), to increased male-on-female violence resulting from a loss of control (Silberschmidt, 2005), or to growing gender parity, if not role reversal (Agadjanian, 2005).

Referencing Lagos, Nigeria, Michael Watts (2005, p. 185) calls theirs a “‘postresistance’ generation” marked by an alternative politics of style. He questions the utility of scholarship that celebrates the “commodity fetish” rather than “commodity production” (Watt, 2005, p. 189). The neoliberal economy indisputably creates unemployment and underemployment in low-return, informal sector work, leaving Africans wanting. In Abidjan, the majority of men cannot live up to the model wage laborer imported under colonial regimes with physical force and ideological persuasion. Denied this possibility, they cannot fully contribute to their families or communities (Agadjanian, 2005; Lindsay, 2003a, 2003b; Silberschmidt, 2005). While indeed a poor replacement for commodity production, the commodity fetish nevertheless fills an absence as men struggle to define their manhoods according to a global metric. Romaric, a twenty-eight year-old mobile street vendor says, “Even if you are a shoe shiner, if you wash cars, you are whatever, when you go out at night you are well-dressed, you are appreciated by the girls.”

To my question, “Why do you like hip hop?” Yves, a twenty year-old mobile street vendor responded, “Because I like what Americans *do*...It is *le business*,²⁰ you see.” In a familiar string of Abidjanais logic, hip hop style suggests the United States—which, in turn, suggests a ubiquitous, albeit vague, “business” ideal. Similarly, images of global celebrities personify consumerist lifestyles. Of pop culture personalities, Jeffrey Chang (2005, p. 447) says, “Here was the media monopolies’ appropriation of dub logic...The biggest artists were brands themselves, generating lifestyles based on their own ineffable beings.” On the Abidjanais social scene, artists are synonymous with brands that are, in turn, synonymous with lifestyles, roughly split between the four categories of hip-hop, *rasta* (reggae), *zouglou* and *coupé décalé* (the latter two being Ivoirian music forms). Hip-hop celebrates Americana and a hardened, thug life; *rasta* and *zouglou* signify a concern for social justice and a poetic awareness of poverty’s struggles; and *coupé décalé* suggests a fast, stylish and “Euro” sensibility. Music styles and fashion trends indicate allegiances to popular culture and thus belonging to the world that cannot be demonstrated through now-defunct productive capacities. For example, the local counterfeit brand of choice, Dolce and Gabbana, is known for *coupé décalé* sensation Douk Saga (Matlon, 2011). Manly one-liter Bock Solibra brand beers are called *drogbas* after Ivoirian football hero Didier Drogba, contracted to England’s Chelsea Football Club.

Consider Tupac Shakur, an iconic figure in Abidjan. Representing immense fame alongside an early death that leaves him eternally youthful, his image resonates particularly well for men who are themselves unable to reach the thresholds of adulthood. Barbershop images embellish Tupac, suggesting an entire personality-*cum*-lifestyle of a generic, young black urban

²⁰ Here and elsewhere when I put a quoted word in italics, I indicate the original, non-translated word. In Abidjan, men tend to use the English word for “business,” “black,” and similar references (e.g. “ghetto,” “job,” and “time is money”).

male, well beyond the short-lived existence of a West Coast American rapper from a generation whose moment has since passed.²¹ Furthermore, in Figure 2, his image is set against the American flag, despite his history of artistic and social activism speaking out against an oppressive American system.

When Stephane, a twenty-six year-old mobile street vendor says, “Man is defined by his person, yeah? When you saw me just now, what did you retain from me? It is my style,” he is negating a work-based identity. Instead he purports an identity based on self-presentation, something that to an extent all Abidjanais men can control. Similarly Romaric asserts, “Your trade—that has nothing to do with you yourself, who you are, yeah?” As consumers, men remain consensual actors in a neoliberal global economy even when excluded as workers. Much of contemporary global identity revolves around hobbies, musical preferences and favorite sports teams; one need only think of the fast rise of Facebook and YouTube as testaments to the geographically-unbounded urge to demonstrate connections to networks intimate and anonymous. As a backdrop to a typical street scene, the barbershop sign becomes a way for Abidjanais men to insert the global black male into the urban landscape, thereby suggesting a self-referential subject. In Figure 3, American hip-hop musician Fat Joe is depicted as a comic strip hero, blinged-out in gold *grillz* teeth, hoop earrings and a large gold chain necklace. He wears a matching Champion brand tank and backwards hat exposing the logo. Bulging muscles, he strikes a pose with the word “Bad” scrawled under him.

4.2. *“I will be VIP!”: the global as a social practice*

²¹ For a lengthy exploration of Tupac’s significance for African men, see Weiss (2009, pp. 105-108).

A poignant memory from early in my fieldwork was of a young student sitting proudly at the desk in an office at University of Abidjan, a now-decrepit institution, surrounded by a random collection of journal publications and UN reports (many a decade old) and a barely-functional air conditioner humming loudly in the background. He entreated me to photograph him there, in a self-aggrandizing posture, declaring enthusiastically that one day, he too would be VIP. The use of the acronym VIP is an example of the way Abidjanais have reworked what it means to be a “very important person.” Originally denoting elitist, consumption-oriented environments and adopted by American hip-hop music vernacular, Abidjanais designate their circle of friends or holes-in-the-wall as VIP locations. VIP is no longer about certain perks, a select clientele or high-end services on offer. Liberally used, this term indicates participation in the global economy, where every man can be very important if he says he is. In Figure 4, the “Salon VIP” barbershop is a little shack with Tupac just visible inside.

More than fantasy, imagining a world beyond the African continent becomes a social practice, or a collectively lived experience (Appadurai, 1990), through the meaning that symbols play domestically and in consideration of the opportunities and restraints facing marginal Abidjanais men. The repeated themes in the images represent status markers and tangible means of improving one’s life chances. For example, the most popular practitioners of the musical genres *zouglou* and *coupé décalé* live in France, where they are mavericks of a new urban chic. Ivoirians are proud of this cultural export that has gained notoriety across Africa and in the metropole (Newell, 2009). Blitz, a twenty-three year-old heavily involved in Abidjan’s hip hop scene, described the city as a “platform” for African music. Images of these men who have attained stardom beyond the local make for constant reminders of the economic opportunity and geographic possibility in Abidjan’s own. Two examples are: Yodé, a renowned Ivoirian *zouglou*

musician popular in France (Figure 5), and La Fouine and Jimmy Sosoco, popular North African French rap artists living in Paris's *banlieues* featured on two sides of the same sign (Figure A9 in the online supplement).

Music and football, the two dominant themes in barbershop images, are also dominant strategies for escape in the local imagination.²² Marginal men engage the global through their own participation—not just out of sheer mystification, but also in the distant hopes of becoming global players themselves. Where anticipating a steady wage is equally unlikely, these activities are among the limited opportunities for marginal men worldwide to gain substantial income and status in contemporary capitalism. And even locally, music and football allow men to achieve status within peripheral Abidjan. For example, men organize concerts where they lip-sync the songs they recorded in small, dingy recording studios for 10,000CFA²³ a pop—to audiences composed mostly of other aspiring artists. There is also an extensive network of neighborhood football teams. Though time-consuming, non-remunerated and rarely leading to exposure, affiliation with an official training academy (despite many of the players being well past recruiting age) is itself noteworthy within Abidjan. Roland, a twenty-one year-old former mobile street vendor who plays for a training center in Adjamé says hopefully, “Normally in football, experts say that at thirty years old you can no longer play. But...you never know when your chance will come. One sees people at thirty, thirty one years-old, that is when they signed their professional contract. So we play, we train.” As social practices, these activities provide a

²² When considering the origins of these music genres, recall that their roots are in fact within the African continent. Indeed, there has always been a relationship between African and African diasporic musical forms.

Albeit an activity of European origins, football is a truly global practice. And heroes for men worldwide hail from the global South, mainly South America but increasingly Africa also.

²³ Approximately US\$20.

language through which to articulate one's position in the city and beyond. Bah, an eighteen year-old student and player for Abobo's training center, calls successful African footballers "models" and "big brothers;" similarly he described how he sets an example for the youth in his neighborhood. Not surprisingly, the "Onxxion" barbershop sign features an Ivoirian footballer, Didiger Drogba (Figure A10 in the online supplement).

As men monopolize the music and sports scenes, they embody every man's potentiality and claim masculinity's entitlements. Frequently juxtaposed is the global/external on one side of the sign with the local/African on the other. Suggestive, this elevates both to a comparable status. In the image contained in Figure A11 (see the online supplement)—Alsafo, an Ivoirian from the popular group Magic System, with a successful career in France, towers down from the rooftop of a barbershop; on the other side is American hip-hop musician Usher. On the next sign (Figure A12 of the supplement), internationally acclaimed Brazilian football legend Ronaldho shares space with Djibril Cissé, an Ivoirian footballer playing in France.

The signs also use local signifiers to appropriate the images' content. An example is the term *choco* in a number of salons. *Choco*, short for chocolate, is slang for someone/something ultra-cool. The source of Ivoirian wealth for the first twenty-five years of independence, Côte d'Ivoire country remains the world's largest cocoa exporter. *Choco* references a homegrown product Ivoirians use to claim "number one" status in the global economy. In Figure A13 (see online supplement), Snoop Doggy Dogg advertises the "*Salon Chocos*" barbershop. Painted on the barbershop's wall are reggae artists Ivoirian Alpha Blondy and Jamaican Bob Marley against a ghetto cosmopolitan cityscape.

5. Vindicating blackness: race and the politics of representation

...[T]he appropriation of a common “blackness” can operate as a vehicle through which black residents in Dakar, Brooklyn, Kingston, Bangkok, London, and Recife not only compare their distinctive urban experiences but cultivate a discourse through which they generate particular understandings of the city and their place and possibilities within it. Here, blackness becomes a device of inter-urban connection...It is a way of seeing oneself as part of a larger world of operations, powers, and potentials. (Simone, 2010, p, 49)

I know that here we live like shit, in Burkina [Faso] they live like shit, in Kinshasa they live like shit, even in Brazil, they live like shit. So one must speak of it all, to make it known, see...I want that you, you in America, I want that you know me, Blitz here in Abobo or in Yopougon, [to know that] things are not good...So rap, it's universal. (Blitz, twenty-three year-old mobile street vendor/barber/rapper)

Integral to the barbershop signs' politics of representation is the men's shared blackness.

In the rhetoric of the colonizing mission, “native” and “man” were incompatible categories (Brown, 2003, p. 157). Given the role of race in colonial domination and in contemporary media, images of black men irrespective of their origins are not simple examples of cultural imperialism. Race remains resilient in contests over power and representation today. As a signifier, “blackness” stands in for peripheral spaces, people and survival strategies, all largely disconnected from the global (Simone, 2010, pp. 263-333). The barbershops images play into these ongoing struggles.

5.1. Finding the self reflected in the “other”

Modeste, a twenty-nine year-old mobile street vendor, said of his idols Tupac and R. Kelly, “When I see their videos, I see the way they live and that does something for me, it touches my heart.” Hip-hop and football personalities are iconic representations of lower class men who rose above their birth status. Abidjanais men perceive others who match their demographic profile yet claim international renown—while the two-dimensional, televised image of black stardom crossing the Atlantic flattens their American and European brothers’

deep experiences of violence and repression. Suffering in Abidjan, directly experienced and part of a global narrative of contemporary Africa, contrasts with salvation elsewhere. Alternatively, testimonials of shared experiences of racism as part of the African diaspora's lived urbanity construct commonality through shared pain (Weiss, 2009), such that it is a malleable category that may suggest dominance or resistance. "Blackness as a device embodies a conceptual solidarity" so that, just as "past uses of blackness" stood in for "[exclusion] from certain norms and rights to the city," it now "implies the existence of undocumented worlds of limited visibility thought to haunt the city's modernity or posit radically different ways of being in the city" (Simone, 2010, p. 285). Describing a formative moment as a young boy watching rappers on television, Blitz said that, seeing they were black like him, he resolved that "we were the same."

The white *colon* (i.e., colonist) is rarely seen on Abidjan's periphery. Instead, representation plays into the anonymous, faceless, and institutional character of "othering" that Abidjanais experience daily, and their view of the world beyond their borders largely reflects mass media and advertising. In his writing of the imagination as social practice, Appadurai (1990, p. 9) refers to different landscapes. The media-generated barbershop images/imaginaries of black masculinity are "mediascapes" that "...tend to be image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places." Music videos, for example, contain neatly compacted scripts creating entire realities of what life is like elsewhere while providing glamorous storylines to disempowered urban narratives. When Jaurès' friend told him that life in the United States was difficult, he replied incredulously, "I do not know...we take count of what we see on television."

Prominent images of black men mark a distinct change from an earlier era when Fanon (1967 [1952], p. 100) spoke of colonized people's deep inferiority complex, and the black man's choice was to "turn white or disappear." The media were especially central in guaranteeing domination and negating the image of the black man: "In the magazines the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little white boy, becomes an explorer, an adventurer, a missionary 'who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes'" (Fanon, 1967 [1952], p. 146). Just as images that denigrated blackness denigrated the viewing subject, iconic black representations serve as self-portraits that exalt men across the African diaspora. Echoing an oft-repeated theme, Stephane said, "Every black, if he is in black Africa or in whatever part, it does not matter to me. A black man, I see he is my brother." The juxtaposition in Figure A14 (see online supplement) clearly indicates the changed place blackness holds from one generation to the next. The only image I took from a salon whose owner was markedly older than the otherwise general cohort of men in their twenties and thirties, this first image generically depicts a model: a white man with conservatively cut straight hair cut and outfitted in a suit and tie. The next image features Zai Roi, a Congolese musician, also in a suit, but with a stylized high-top, goatee and diamond earrings.

Critics within the black community legitimately question the real affirming possibilities of stereotyped figures like the athlete and the musician—both of whose bodies becomes the tools of their trade, and who are regularly hyper-sexed symbols. Fanon (1967 [1952]) explores in great length how the emphasis on the black body and its physical potentialities "others" the black man,

and a rich conversation on the matter has since followed suit.²⁴ Nevertheless I underscore that these images glorify the black man and *affirm* his role as a contemporary idealized neoliberal subject—even if that subject has emerged out of corporate media and advertising industries’ aim to co-opt and brand his image (Chang, 2005). Like Yves (see Section 4.1), Rodrigue, a thirty-four year-old mobile street vendor affiliates black America—and black peripheral strategies like his work in the informal sector more generally—with neoliberal hegemony. He explained, “I already know the American system, I am already adapted to the American system because in America over there, it is *le business*, it is *le boulot* [job].” He knew all about this because he had watched “*black* films, American films.” With designer threads and flashy props, black celebrities are “hegemonic” ideals of the “transnational businessman” in the subcultures of music and sport (Connell, 2000). On the African continent, black American style assumes elite status (Pattman, 2005). Depicted within mediascapes, what black stars have, own, and display appear endless. Even if smokescreens obscure what they produce or how, music videos and gossip magazines hyperbolize their consumption practices. For the marginal Abidjanais man without direct access to the reality of life on the other side, the texture of hardship for men in the Paris *banlieues* or the Chicago ghetto is easily lost in translation, captivating instead the imaginative potentialities of their shared “black skin” (c.f. Fanon, 1967 [1952]).

5.2. *Black American (counter)hegemony*

Though barbershop images depict men from Africa and throughout the African diaspora, the black American is a particularly popular image in the Abidjanais imagination. The United

²⁴ For example, see Hopkinson and Moore’s (2006, pp. 29-34) discussion of Thelma Golden’s 1994 show entitled “Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art;” and for a historical account, see Saint-Aubin (2005).

States, with its highly commercialized black population and muted colonial legacy offers an attractive model of hegemony around which Ivoirians may rally instead of the French *colon*. Arnaud, a twenty-six year-old mobile street vendor said that the United States was the “last word;” to be American was to be respected. He went on, “We know that over there, men are really strong.” The “paradoxical location” of the black American (Hanchard, 1990, p. 32) suggests both participation in and marginalization within the global hegemon. Thus, it is from the vantage point of the American that Abidjanais men often locate their black identities. Here in Figure 6 is *Africa Coiffure*, or “Africa Barbershop.” Noteworthy is that this barber chooses neither to designate his shop “Afrique,” the French translation, nor the pan-Africanist “Afrika.” Instead he writes the English translation of Africa, thus elevating Africa through an Anglophone, and presumably black American-led pan-African narrative. This reference point for “Africa” is historically contiguous with cultural interchange between the continent and its diaspora (Patterson and Kelley, 2000). A similar point applies to the term “Black” instead of *Noir* in another barbershop sign (Figure A16 of the online supplement). As a feedback loop of cultural production, the African diaspora’s representation of Africa becomes a means by which marginal African subjects gain global cultural legitimacy (see also Weiss, 2009, p. 41).

5.3. Barbershop images as local visibility and global participation

In writing about mimicry, Ferguson (2006, p. 161) notes that when “urban Africans seized so eagerly on European cultural forms...they were asserting rights to the city...and pressing, by their conduct, claims to the political and social rights of full membership in a wider society.” The urban denoted cosmopolitan, civilized society, and in Francophone Africa to be civilized was to be “evolved”—*évolué*—to have transitioned out of the childlike state of the

native into the full adulthood of the European. The white/black distinction figured into a civilized/savage binary, accompanied by tangible rights and entitlements. Using the cityscape to indicate contemporary being-in-the-world is a nod to the global social order's emphasis on display and consumption to indicate *participation*. Painting urban public space with images of black men is a way for them to make history, a territorialization that affirms their access to the city and its accompanying rights. It signals a new chapter in African narratives of urban sociality. The barbershop signs constitute a politics of representation that redresses colonialism's attempt to paint white men's blackness.

As object subjects, African urbanites' desire to be modern assumes a "social status implying certain institutional and economic conditions of life," which they see themselves denied (Ferguson, 2006, p. 168). However, the barbershop images indicate ways that marginal, informal sector men self-identify in order to elevate their status and gain a sense of belonging in the world—and in their city. Exogenous symbols and practices generate a social practice where they contest their invisibility at the periphery (Matlon, 2011). These strategies involve displaying one's metropolitan existence and emphasizing consumption practices (Mbembe and Nutall, 2004). In complex and contradictory ways, the black men that barbershop signs showcase figure into colonial and contemporary history and local and global context. Locally, they provide visibility to marginal men embedded in an ongoing history of being rendered invisible in urban spaces. Globally, they provide proof of citizenship—active participation in "civilized" society—for men who fall short of the criteria for manhood in capitalist society.

6. Eternal boyhoods: males and gender disempowerment

[Consumption] is the invisible hand, or the Gucci-gloved fist, that animates the political impulses, the material imperatives, and the social forms of...capitalism in its neoliberal, global manifestation. (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001, p. 4)

Abidjan's gendered barbershop images and consumption practices more generally demonstrate how consumption has become a redemptive force for men lacking productive capacities. Failing as producers, marginal Abidjanais men are not fully "men" in their society but boys. Accordingly, youth are consumers and adults, defined by their active productive capacities and their accompanying entitlements, are workers.

6.1. Unproductive and unmarried

Among marginal Abidjanais men, marriage is rare. For the vendors I studied, even having a girlfriend was uncommon. Modeste explained, "You can't have a girlfriend, someone who loves you as you are like this, or not?" While wage labor initially gave youth an unprecedented autonomy from their elders as they pursued adulthood and its accompanying entitlements, it now denies men the ability to achieve adulthood, and without recourse to alternatives (Lindsay, 2003b). Even these marginal Abidjanais men who never had opportunities to attain this ideal have nonetheless internalized it. A typical response to the question "Are you married?" is the statement, accompanied by a sneer or downcast eyes and always a sense of helplessness, "*Je n'ai pas le moyen*," or "I don't have the means." The men I studied insisted that, irrespective of whether they had fathered a child, as participants in the precarious informal economy they were being responsible in their decision not to marry. They believed that as husbands they would become "bad" or incapable fathers, negating the biological fact of their fatherhood (see also Cornwall, 2003). This rationale evades the accountability that legal marriage entails: offering occasional support without the legal sanction of a provider's status is, in the least, safer for a

marginal man's ego. "Men's difficulties in providing financial assistance to the household undermin[e] their social roles and their social value" (Silberschmidt, 2005, p. 192). Wages validate a man's image of himself as provider and make him an attractive partner; without them "men of all ages...sense that they have little to offer women who can or must fend for themselves (Lindsay, 2003b, pp. 210-211). But essential to obtaining "senior" or "adult" masculinity across a wide range of African societies is marriage (Lindsay, 2003a, 2003b; Miescher, 2003; Obeng, 2003).

6.2. Men's spaces: excluded, and excluding

Unable to act as breadwinners for the families they do not have, Abidjanais men reject the roles their society expects of them and the relationships they are to cultivate with women. Alternatively, male-dominated images in public space validate a masculinist culture. Men have their hair cut surrounded by images of Abidjanais and international personalities. They are all men in a man's space. The implicit claim of an advertisement is an equalizer: the man in the image could also be the client.²⁵ On this sign the artist has superimposed a razor over Barack Obama—a particularly appealing example of a hegemonic black man (Figure 7).

Barbershops signs serve the dual purpose of attesting to consumption capacities and to marginal men's participation in Abidjan and beyond. Though Abidjan is one of West Africa's less conservative cities, rarely did barbershop interiors contain pinups of women. The male-dominated barbershop images reinforce a gender-segregated culture (see also Agadjanian, 2005; for a discussion on gendering of public spaces, including barbershops, see Weiss, 2009, pp. 79-86). Furthermore, barbershops display male celebrities; while similar images are appearing in

²⁵ In practice, the vast majority of Abidjanais men wear the staple haircut of a buzzed/shaved head. Thus the actual hairstyles of the men in the images do not reflect looks that clients intend to replicate.

women's salons, they use generic models to advertise particular hairstyles instead of to suggest iconic personalities and lifestyles. Perhaps this is because changes in the global economy do not threaten women's roles as mothers and wives.²⁶ Though deep marginalization is certainly a shared condition of urban African men and women, the latter need not look elsewhere for affirmation of their gendered roles. They need not validate themselves by linking their identities to mass media personalities. By contrast, men embrace identities suggesting they are something, or someone, else. Thierry, a thirty-two year-old shoe vendor in Abidjan's main Adjamé market, boasted to me that an "Anglophone" once confused him for an American because of his hip hop clothing. He had transformed himself into a "more potent social be[ing]" (Newell, 2005, p. 171). In Figure 8, a black American in athletic attire squats below a sign announcing that this barbershop is both "international" (abbreviated by "inter") and "high class."

Despite the power of the capitalist man-as-provider narrative, the marginal Abidjanais man's minimal and unsteady earnings do little to attract women. His masculinity is at threat. The barbershop images offer a redemptive response to his inadequacies. Barbershop images contain models—alternative ideals—of legitimated affirmations of masculinity, men whose identities are predicated on consumption patterns yet still get the ladies. Images of Ivoirian *zouglou* artist Molière and American musician LL Cool J demonstrate a dignified blackness marked by "clean" and "honorable" looks, respectively (Figures A19 and A20, respectively, in the online supplement).

²⁶ This is not to suggest that women are more privileged than men within the neoliberal global economy. It is to say that these changes have jeopardized men's identities as men under capitalism in ways that women's identities have not similarly been threatened. Making a similar argument, Agadjanian (2005) further suggests that men's increased vulnerabilities lead in some ways to women's empowerment, especially among the informal sector urban poor. Silberschmidt (2005, p. 194) suggests that, in creating a new social role as providing for the household, men become only "figureheads."

6.3. *Youth as a social category*

Because these men cannot live up to social expectations of manhood, they remain youths.²⁷ If in contexts of greater opportunity, we think of “youth” as a period to explore what is possible and adulthood as the time one settles into a constructive/productive identity, then “youth” in landscapes of deprivation takes on a broad, porous category. Despite Côte d’Ivoire’s 2005 average life expectancy of 48.7 years (African Development Bank, 2009),²⁸ men in their late thirties still commonly refer to themselves as “youth.” Youth has become an extended category, now encompassing the bulk of a man’s life. Marginal men remain linked to youth culture because they lack the jobs to support a family that would identify them as adults (see also Newell, 2009). Figure A21 shows images of *Jeunesse Coiffure* or “Youth Barbershop” that feature Senegalese musician Akon who lives in the United States and American singer Usher (see online supplement).

One vendor, Thierry, dismissed his earnings when mobile street vending as only “weekend money.” Men’s limited earnings offer greater potential to consume petty goods that embellish their person than to invest in “wiser” expenses such as a house or a child’s education. In contrast to women burdened with family responsibilities, their financial behavior is suggestive of a teenager’s “play” money. Weiss (2009, p. 237) says that consumption practices “[highlight] the status of youth, both as a social category and a problematic condition.” It also reflects neoliberal capitalism’s buy now, worry later ethos. Comaroff and Comaroff (2005, p. 25) write

²⁷ Youth is a category both extended *and gendered*. The majority of studies that I have read on African youth culture are gendered male. See, for example, de Boeck and Honwana (2005).

²⁸ This figure does not adjust for child mortality; otherwise the life expectancy would be somewhat higher.

that teenagers have become “actors-through-consumption, [buying]...into mainstream interests at the same time as they contested them.” This “politics of style” became “the predicament of would-be subversaries in advanced capitalist contexts, of those who struggle to seize control of commodified signs and practices...” Marginal Abidjanais men face the dilemma of engaging in a battle around cultural forms that brings them no closer to destabilizing either the powers that be or an oppressive system more generally. Nonetheless, popular culture provides a “haven for people’s passions to live differently” (Simone, 2010, p. 316), and marginal men throughout the global South respond to their disempowerment through cultural appropriation, particularly through the tropes of hip hop and football.²⁹ Proud of his renown via a non-work identity, Gueï, a twenty-three year-old mobile street vendor says, “People in my neighborhood, they know me, they appreciate me, because I have style.” Like many particularly stylish, artistically or athletically talented informal sector men I encountered, his distinction also helped him to stand out his neighborhood, and gives him discounts, and hence a slight edge, in his day-to-day expenses. But such perks are far from offering a way out of life on the periphery.

Thus the rigidities of socioeconomic exclusion are very real. “Hip hop, Air Jordans, and Manchester United colours may animate youthful imaginations almost everywhere, often serving as a poignant measure of the distance between dream and fulfillment, between desire and impossibility, between centres of great wealth and peripheries of crushing poverty” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005, p. 27). But these men are no longer teenagers; their imaginations are youthful, though they are not. The difference between boys and men demarcate the distance between dream and fulfillment. Men at the center and boys abandoned to the periphery, this is

²⁹ For essays on the global hip hop movement, see these edited volumes: Samy Alim, Ibrahim and Pennycook (2009), Basu and Lemelle (2006), and Mitchell (2001). For a discussion of football’s influence on identity in a West African context, see Vidacs (2009).

the latest rendition of colonial civilized/savage distinctions. However they may suffer from the pain of abjection, marginal Abidjanais men find belonging in mediascapes where, cultural consumers of the African diaspora, they constitute a collective, borderless and eternalized youth. They are visible.

In Abidjanais social vernacular, to call someone *garçon*—literally, boy—is the ultimate compliment: *il est garçon*. Approvingly, Blitz says that “Being a *garçon*, you must fight.” For men whose productive capacities are partial and inactive, they appropriate the diminutive *garçon* as a designator that has historically suggested failure as a man. Compare this to an earlier generation of which Ferguson (2006) speaks, when rights to the city required fitting into the mold of what constituted a civilized *man*. Indeed, throughout the African continent, the designator boy was a deeply contested colonialist insult that denied the possibility of black men being men at all (Brown, 2003; Shear, 2003). *Garçon* counters the fact that men cannot assume masculinities predicated on notions of adulthood, elders, or “big men” statuses within their communities (Lindsay and Miescher, 2003). This celebration of reversal, glorifying an eternal boyhood, responds to global cues of a consumption-based youth culture at the same time as the extended category of youth contends with masculine lack and failure. It celebrates the minor term of a colonial binary, suggesting survival in a hard-knock life.

7. Conclusion: *Tu connais pas Abidjan?*

My analysis of barbershop images and their resonance among marginal Abidjanais men contests a predominant theme in contemporary African scholarship, namely that marginal urbanites’ global fascination necessitates a turn away from “nationalist and pan-African narratives and with them their attributes, biographies and times” (Diouf, 2005, p. 231). As a

politics of representation, marginal Abidjanais men (“youth”) connect to globally successful men in the African diaspora. In doing so, they co-opt discourses from elsewhere. As Ferguson (2006) indicates, however, the success of the colonial project was largely on predicated linking inclusion in civil society with the social and cultural attributes of the colonizer; this was not a matter of mindless “mimicry” but importantly about “membership” with those rights to the city that membership accrued. When considering the contradictory state of abjection marginal African men face today, falling shamefully short when confronting ideals of what a man ought to be, it is clear that membership has in no way receded into the background of what is either desirable or necessary.

Abidjan’s barbershop images counter men’s exclusions. Constructing local and pan-African narratives is highly relevant to this neoliberal, media- and advertising-saturated age. Responding to the destructive effects of structural adjustment on African economies, Africans “substitute for this an ‘elsewhere,’ either near or distant, and the illusions of economic globalization” (Diouf, 2005, p. 231). Neoliberal realities have indeed rendered these men redundant in their local economies. And, pushed out as men and citizens, they look beyond their national borders to define themselves (Diouf, 2003; Simone, 2010). They find affirmative likenesses in masculine icons throughout the African diaspora, potent symbols given the continuing relationship between blackness and exclusion. But marginal Abidjanais men also celebrate their history of exceptionalism and claim parity with the global that they are constantly domesticating. As they assert a revised definition of what it means to be Abidjanais today, they shape this identity with practices from within and without.

West African social, economic and political history since Ivoirian independence raised Abidjan to the status of a formidable regional center, a civilized city. Nonetheless, contemporary

Abidjanais contend with defining their culture independent of continuing French domination. On the urban periphery, Abidjanais identity is free of the mark of French civilization. In the *quartiers populaires* a new generation engages in a politics of representation, selecting cultural cues with which to create externally *and* locally legitimated identities.

Upon seeing a taxi driver make a traffic-congesting blunder in one of Yopougon's or Abobo's busy intersections, one hears a chorus of angry passers-by question facetiously *tu connais pas Abidjan?* meaning "don't you know Abidjan?" While residual pride in Abidjan's faded status as the "Paris of West Africa" certainly exists, a new pride has emerged wherein to know Abidjan is to know how to navigate those spaces excluded from the *colon's* city, where rules are not written in clear signage but understood collectively through the trials and errors of time and experience: the street smarts of Abidjan, a city in the global periphery. It is to know the grittier Abidjan invisible to outsiders, the brushed-aside shame of a decaying and largely absent state whose abandoned spaces do not figure onto postcards. The same applies to these barbershop signs: no advertising company sent marketing consultants to the *communes* to determine what would most appeal to young Abidjanais men; these signs sprung up as local, collective processes of articulating what it means to be a black man in Abidjan's periphery and in the global neoliberal economy.

Contests of representation marked colonial cities since their inception, with the built environment an integral tool for dominating and othering native populations (AlSayyad, 1992). These images contest this history. What Abidjanais men display in these barbershop signs are a particular form of postcolonial, African diaspora, and marginal masculinity affirmed through a politics of representation. Domesticated global symbols structure a social practice through which Abidjanais men mold local belonging, both imagined and realized, countering their irrelevance

through proof of their participation. They respond to postcolonial domination through the appearance of blackness. They assert belonging through the practice of consumption.

In Weiss's (2009, p. 154) study, "women were concerned about finding men who would demonstrate their trustworthiness by accepting responsibility for their children." They reject the "thugs" at the barbershop. But it is also clear that those thugs can barely get by; therefore, "[p]ain is the generative principle of the habitus of the informal sector" (Weiss, 2009, p. 123). I suggest that men's rejections of women are responses to their own rejection; the "expulsion of women from urban sociality" (Weiss, 2009, p. 84) is a response to their expulsion as productive actors in the public sphere of work and the private sphere of breadwinners at home. Thus, this is a failed masculinity because it is one that does not—*cannot*—assert them as men in their society but rather as boys restricted to the male-segregated spaces of the city and the fantasy worlds of an abstract media.

Marginalized Abidjanais men confront a global economic climate wherein they are no longer exploited but excluded. They respond accordingly, desiring not to resist exploitation but to counter exclusion with belonging—achieved through representing themselves through iconic male images from the African diaspora. However, the desire to belong links this generation's desire to those of previous generations, in both cases insisting on Abidjan's place in a global order. As hybrid signifiers, the barbershop images are foremost about knowing and understanding Abidjan, because for the marginal Abidjanais man, the first stage of belonging in the world is belonging in this city. Belonging is of special significance for men since it is the man's role that the capitalist-colonial project linked to the modern, the public, and the productive: the essence of masculine identity is at stake in the politics of representation. For and by men, the images situate men in a man's world. The distinct absence of women as participants

or as spectators no doubt speaks to a troublesome male-female disconnect, wherein the contemporary African generation surely continues to share a bed but not a common discourse around inspirations, imaginations, goals or ambitions. This is a dilemma that is unfortunately well beyond the scope of my analysis. What these barbershop images indicate, however, are ways that Abidjanais men articulate their identities and validate themselves as men in the city and beyond despite their marginal positions. Perhaps the most telling indication that these men are self-referencing as central players in their worlds is the emerging trend to figure themselves—neither local nor global personalities—in the images (Figure 9). It is a literal elevation of their own status as individuals equal to any celebrity near or distant. It suggests a redemptive possibility that, in seizing and domesticating a popular trend, they may become their own superstars. Fanon (1967 [1952], p. 112) puts in plainly: “All I wanted was to be a man among other men.”

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my research assistants Tino and MC, Zapin and the Academy Rap Revolution, and all the barbers who welcomed me to photograph their shops. I extend great thanks to my dissertation Chair Raka Ray for feedback on multiple drafts and to the exceptional women of her Gender Dissertation Working Group for their comments. Many thanks also to Ananya Roy, Peter Matlon, the organizers and participants of the 2010 Michigan Social Theory Conference Visuality Panel, and the editors and anonymous reviewers of *Poetics* for their constructive feedback. And my gratitude to Julie Hopper for her invaluable technical help with the photos.

References

African Development Bank Economic and Social Statistics Division, 2009. ADB Statistics Pocketbook, Volume 11. ADB Statistics Department, Tunis.

Agadjanian, V., Men doing “women’s work”: masculinity and gender relations among street vendors in Maputo, Mozambique. In: Ouzgane, L., Morell, R. (Eds.), *African Masculinities: Men*

in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, pp. 257-270.

Alexander, B.K., 2003. Fading, twisting, and weaving: an interpretive ethnography of the black barbershop as cultural space. *Qualitative Inquiry* 9, 105-128.

AlSayyad, N. (Ed.), 1992. *Forms of Dominance: On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise*. Avebury, Aldershot, UK.

Appadurai, A., 1990. Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy. *Public Culture* 2 (2), 1-24.

Basu, D., Lemelle, S.J. (Eds), 2006. *The Vinyl Ain't Final: Hip Hop and the Globalization of Black Popular Culture*. Pluto Press, Ann Arbor, MI.

Boone, C., 1995. The social origins of Ivoirian exceptionalism: rural society and state formation. *Comparative Politics* 24, 445-463.

Brown, C.A., 2003. A "man" in the village is a "boy" in the workplace: colonial racism, worker militance, and Igbo notions of masculinity in the Nigerian coal industry, 1930-1945. In: Lindsay, L.A., Miescher, S.F. (Eds.), *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*. Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, pp. 156-174.

Chang, J., 2005. *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. St. Martin's Press, New York.

Comaroff, J., Comaroff, J.L. (Eds), 2001. *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

Comaroff, J., Comaroff, J.L., 2005. Reflections of youth: from the past to the postcolony. In: de Boeck, F., Honwana, A. (Eds), *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*. Africa World Press, Trenton, NJ, pp. 19-30.

Connell, R.W., 2000. *The Men and the Boys*. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Cooper, F., 2005. *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Cornwall, A.A., 2003. To be a man is more than a day's work: Shifting ideals of masculinity in Ado-Odo, southwestern Nigeria. In: Lindsay, L.A., Miescher, S.F. (Eds.), *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*. Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, pp. 230-248.

- De Boeck, F. Honwana, A. (Eds), 2005. *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*. Africa World Press, Trenton, NJ.
- Diouf, A., 2003. Engaging postcolonial cultures: African youth and public space. *African Studies Review* 46 (2), 1-12.
- Diouf, A., 2005. Afterword. In: de Boeck, F., Honwana, A. (Eds.), *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*. Africa World Press, Trenton, NJ, pp. 229-234.
- Fanon, F., 1967 (1952). *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. Grove Press, New York.
- Ferguson, J., 1999. *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*. University of California Press, Berkeley. CA.
- Ferguson, J., 2006. *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC.
- Floor, R., 2010. *African Signs*. KIT Publishers, Haarlem, NL.
- Franklin, C.W., 1985. The black male urban barbershop as a sex-role socialization setting. *Sex Roles* 12, 965-979.
- Hanchard, M., 1990. Identity, meaning and the African-American. *Social Text* 24, 31-42.
- Harris-Lacewell, M., 2004. *Barbershops, Bibles and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Hopkinson, N., Moore, N.Y., 2006. *Deconstructing Tyrone: A New Look at Black Masculinity in the Hip-Hop Generation*. Cleis Press, San Francisco.
- Institut National de la Statistique, 2003. *L'emploi, le chômage et les conditions d'activité dans l'agglomération d'Abidjan: Premiers resultants de la phase 1 sur l'emploi, 2002*. République de Côte d'Ivoire.
- Lindsay, L.A., 2003a. Money, marriage and masculinity on the colonial Nigerian railway. In: Lindsay, L.A., Miescher, S.F. (Eds.), *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*. Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, pp. 138-155.
- Lindsay, L.A., 2003b. *Working with Gender: Wage Labor and Social Change in Southwestern Nigeria*. Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH.
- Lindsay, L.A., Miescher, S.F. (Eds.), 2003. *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*. Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH.

- Mamdani, M., 1996. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Colonialism*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Matlon, J., 2010. Creating public fictions: the black man as producer and consumer. *The Black Scholar* 40 (3), 36-42.
- Matlon, J., 2011. Informality and visibility on the periphery. Photo essay. *Contexts* 10 (2), 58-63.
- Mbembe, A., Nutall, S., 2004. Writing the world from an African metropolis. *Public Culture* 16, 347-372.
- McDonnell, T.E., 2010. Cultural objects as objects: materiality, urban space, and the interpretation of AIDS campaigns in Accra, Ghana. *American Journal of Sociology* 115, 1800-1852.
- Miescher, S.F., 2003. The making of Presbyterian teachers: masculinities and programs of education in colonial Ghana. In: Lindsay, L.A., Miescher, S.F. (Eds.), *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*. Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, pp. 89-108.
- Mingst, K.A., 1988. The Ivory Coast at the semi-periphery of the world-economy. *International Studies Quarterly* 32, 259-274.
- Mitchell, T., (Ed.), 2001. *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop outside the USA*. Middleton, CT, Wesleyan University Press.
- Newell, S., 2009. Enregistering modernity, bluffing criminality: how Nouchi speech reinvented (and fractured) the nation. *Linguistic Anthropology* 19, 157-184.
- Newell, S., 2005. Migratory modernity and the cosmology of consumption in Côte d'Ivoire. In: Trager, L. (Ed.), *Migration and Economy: Global and Local Dynamics*. AltaMira Press, Lanham, MD, pp. 163-190.
- Nyankawindemera, A., Zanou, B., 2001. Migration et reparation spatiale de la population en Côte d'Ivoire. *École Nationale Supérieure de Statistique et d'Économie Appliquée*, Abidjan.
- Obeng, P., 2003. Gendered nationalism: Forms of masculinity in modern Asante of Ghana. In: Lindsay, L.A., Miescher, S.F. (Eds.), *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*. Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, pp. 192-208.
- Ouzgane, L., Morrell, R. (Eds), 2005. *African Masculinities: Men in African from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Patterson, T.R., Kelley, R.D.G., 2000. Unfinished migrations: reflections on the African diaspora and the making of the modern world. *African Studies Review* 43, 11-45.

Pattman, R., 2005. "Ugandans," "cats" and others: constructing student masculinities at the University of Botswana. In: Ouzgane, L., Morell, R. (Eds.), *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, pp. 221-236.

Njegovanović-Ristić, N., 2009. *Hairdresser and Barbershop Signs in Africa*. Museum of African Art, Belgrade, Serbia.

Saint-Aubin, A.F., 2005. A grammar of black masculinity: a body of science. In: Ouzgane, L., Morell, R. (Eds.), *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, pp. 23-42.

Samy Alim, H., Ibrahim, A., Pennycook, A. (Eds), 2009. *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities and the Politics of Language*. Routledge, New York.

Shear, K., 2003. "Taken as boys": The politics of Black police employment and experience in early twentieth-century South Africa. In: Lindsay, L.A., Miescher, S.F. (Eds.), *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*. Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH, pp. 109-127.

Silberschmidt, M. 2005. Poverty, male disempowerment, and male sexuality: Rethinking men and masculinities in rural and urban East Africa. In: Ouzgane, L., Morell, R. (Eds.), *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, pp. 189-204.

Simone, A., 2010. *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar: Movements at the Crossroads*. Routledge, New York.

Union Économique et Monétaire Ouest-Africaine, 2001-2002. *Le marché du travail dans la principale agglomération de sept pays de l'UEMOA*. UEMOA, PARSTAT, OuagFidelgou.

United Nations Development Programme, 2008. *Human Development Report*. Human Development Office of UNDP, New York. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics>

United Nations Population Division, 2009. *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2009 Revision Population Database*. Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, New York. <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/index.htm>

Vidacs, B., 2009. Football in Cameroon: a vehicle for the expansion and contraction of identity. *Sport in Society* 2, 100-117.

Watts, M., 2005. Baudelaire over Berea, Simmel over Sandton? *Public Culture* 17, 181-192.

Weiss, B., 2009. *Street Dreams and Hip Hop Barbershops: Global Fantasy in Urban Tanzania*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.

Wright, E. II, Calhoun, T.C., 2001. From the common thug to the local businessman: an exploration into an urban African-American barbershop. *Deviant Behavior* 22, 267-288.

Zartman, I.W., Delgado, C. (Eds.), 1984. *The Political Economy of Ivory Coast*. Praeger, New York.