

# THIS IS HOW WE ROLL: THE STATUS ECONOMY OF BUS PORTRAITURE IN THE BLACK URBAN PERIPHERY

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*I wish to thank the organizers and all those who provided feedback on earlier versions of this paper which I presented at the African Studies Association 2013 Annual Meeting, the 2013 University of Ghana's Institute for African Studies conference, the 2013 European Conference on African Studies meeting, and the International Visual Sociology Association 2013 Annual Conference. Thanks also to this issue's guest editors Oksana Zaporozhets and Natalia Samutina, the editors and anonymous reviewers of Laboratorium for their valuable feedback, and Carlos Carmona Medina. This research was completed with the generous support of the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship and the French National Research Agency–Laboratory of Excellence Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse (Agence Nationale de la Recherche–Labex IAST).*

**The absence of formal employment opportunities in African cities leaves many men unable to achieve an idealized, modern wage-earning masculinity, such that socially they remain boys. They may contest their denigrated status by investing in practices that supplant this dominant narrative of masculinity. Specifically, images of iconic black men invoke an experience of modernity-as-alterity, shared across the global black diaspora. As men assert their common blackness through visual expression, they fuel lucrative economies. In this transatlantic interplay, the urban periphery transforms supralocal cultural references into material practices that buttress local identities. This article introduces the concept of status economies to examine the politics of representation and to track the dollars and dreams on Africa's urban periphery. I discuss the practice of *gbaka* (bus) portrait art as an example of a status economy in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. I explore the nexus between *gbaka* art, changing work regimes, and masculinity to understand how peripheral men's search for status generates a cultural movement and an associated economy.**

**Keywords:** African Urbanism; Blackness; Côte d'Ivoire; Informal Economy; Masculinity; Status; Vehicular Art

## CELEBRITY SPOTTING AT RUSH HOUR

It is rush hour in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, and traffic is bumper-to-bumper. It is 2009, and I am going from the bustling Adjamé market to one of the *quartiers populaires* (peripheral neighborhoods). The sides of the road are dense with informal commerce: portable market stalls dominate the sidewalk with hawkers plying their trade, women balance heavy baskets of fabric or vegetables on their heads, and men walk between cars selling a mismatched collection of wares. Private automobiles are interspersed with white standard-issue United Nations sports utility vehicles, but public transportation dominates. Abundant and in a wide variety of conditions, red private taxis and yellow shared taxis, or *woro woros*, solicit passengers. The occasional long-haul truck or city bus navigates the heavy mix of pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Most colorful, however, are the *gbakas*: private, informally operated buses that service commuters to and from Abidjan's deep periphery. Almost all have a slogan or a small symbol, perhaps the Nike swoosh or an Ivorian flag, painted somewhere on their exterior. I catch a glimpse of a *gbaka* featuring Michael Jackson a few vehicles ahead of my taxi. Jackson glows, defying the polluted gray-brown dust and exhaust that saturate the humid air. His iconic black sunglasses and Jheri curl hairstyle are painted against the stars and stripes of the American flag (see Figure 1). Beginning his career as a young boy in the all-family group the Jackson Five, for decades Jackson, the "King of Pop," defined American music, dance, and style. He won scores of music awards, and his 1982 *Thriller* remains the best-selling album of all time. Michael Jackson was among the first truly global black icons.



Figure 1. Michael Jackson, American pop legend. Abidjan, August 18, 2009.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All photos are by the author.

This image of Jackson pays homage to a man and a way of life, both fictitious and distant. When seen weaving through this congested Abidjanais street, he is entirely absorbed into the city's vernacular. *Gbaka* portraits, like popular artistic practices found throughout urban centers in global peripheries, signal the ascendance of the fantasized realm vis-à-vis the diminished life chances of all those who consume the images: notably drivers, but also riders and passersby.

This is the first century in which the majority of the world's population lives in cities. This demographic shift has been the result of countless young people, most from the Global South, leaving their rural homesteads in search of work and opportunity in the cities of their countries and around the world. They continue to do this despite the fact that over the past quarter century the common "pull" factors for migration—formal work, higher incomes, better access to education, and improved quality of life—have waned. It is within this context, I suggest, that we must consider the significance of Michael Jackson on Abidjan's *gbakas*. The eighth of ten children, Jackson used his star attraction to beat the odds, going from working-class African American child to all-time legend. He embodied possibility and promise.

Conducting participant-observation fieldwork with workers in Abidjan's informal economy from 2008 to 2009, I found that many men drew on media narratives of iconic black males in music and sports to signal their own membership in a global economy in the absence of formal work, which I define as work that provides wage remuneration. Men in Abidjan associated a steady wage with a dignified working identity and used this criterion to distinguish "real" work from the hustle of self-employment or contractual work—which could range from running a successful *maquis* (open-air bar or restaurant) to driving a taxi or mobile street vending. This association emerged as a consequence of colonial-era norms.<sup>2</sup> Unmarried and underemployed men contested their status as social juniors by devoting resources to practices that supplant dominant narratives of idealized masculinity. Like barbershop signs I analyzed in an earlier article (Matlon 2011a), *gbaka* portraits represent an Abidjanais vernacular that plays off the tropes of *global*, *black*, and *male*. Global, because the images signal belonging to a world beyond Africa. Black, because they affirm racialized identities that the media has historically erased or denigrated. Male, because they legitimate the manhoods of men who, without wages, are cast as boys. Abidjanais men draw on mediascapes (Appadurai 1990) of the black urban imaginary to write scripts of an attainable masculinity.

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<sup>2</sup> These categories of formal/informal work are admittedly hazy. Nonetheless, they reflect the way my research subjects divided the job market into salaried, respectable jobs and everything else. Men often elaborated on this idea by describing work in an air-conditioned office, performed by employees who wore suits and carried briefcases. As I explain below, the categories emerged from a colonial regime wherein the overwhelming majority of work in the new, modern economy—particularly that which was available to Ivoirians—was in the civil service. Men did, however, valorize private business ownership, and many spoke ambitiously of becoming businessmen themselves. However, they still described themselves as *chômeurs*, or unemployed men, and contrasted this with the stable remuneration they believed came from "real" work. My analysis explores how the changing reality of work has pushed the boundaries of what could be considered dignifying work, including relatively high-skilled or capital-intensive trades such as driving a *gbaka*.

## AFRICAN MASCULINITY AND WORK: THE POWER OF THE WAGE

Colonialism in Africa promoted the entitlements and comforts of modernity to urban dwellers who embraced its models; for men, a central component entailed becoming laborers in the nascent formal economy where wages were “gendered as male” (Lindsay 2003:115). This persisted after independence, and newly liberated Africans anticipated that the modern man, with his salary, would develop the national economy and support his family (Cooper 2003; Ferguson 1999, 2006; Lindsay 2003; Simone 2004). With time, steady paychecks made these modern workers preferred marriage partners (Lindsay 2003). Precolonial African societies linked manhood—the transition from social junior to elder—to marriage. But after the introduction of wage labor, in order to marry a man first needed to be employed. Moreover, in the urban colonial context the “big man”—“perhaps the most enduring image of African masculinity” (Lindsay 2003:3)—was now equated with the *patron* or *chef*, the “boss” in an enterprise or a civil service bureau capable of dispersing money, favors, and jobs. Beyond the obvious fact that work generates income, formal employment also created opportunities for patronage (Ekeh 1975; Le Pape 1997).

The past three decades of economic growth in sub-Saharan African cities have passed without the formal economy becoming a viable source of employment, such that Achille Mbembe suggests that “it is quite reasonable to hypothesize an end to a wage-employed African labor force” (2001:55). The disappearance of formal employment opportunities leaves men without the means to achieve this aspirational model of masculinity (Agadjanian 2005; Lindsay 2003; Lindsay and Miescher 2003; Silberschmidt 2005). Without steady, dignified work their “social roles and their social value” are “undermined” (Silberschmidt 2005:192). In other words, socially these men remain boys (Matlon 2011a; Newell 2012; Weiss 2009). Moreover, historically women were left to participate in informal activities that were not absorbed by the new work regime, such as food preparation and trade in local markets. Women were thus associated with informality, and men sought “more secure, lucrative, and prestigious jobs, commensurate with their dominant gender status” (Agadjanian 2005:266). In short, gendered work binaries instituted during the colonial period have made it difficult for men to establish themselves as social elders in their families and communities in the absence of formal work. This association illustrates how economic roles incorporate masculinity and femininity as a relational schema, with wage labor becoming an intermediary to a colonial vision of African masculinity and what it entailed: Europe, modernity, and civilization. Informal economic activities, or nonsalaried work, became its obverse: feminine, African, primitive, and backward.

This article engages in a preliminary exploration of *gbaka* portrait art to consider the nexus between *gbaka* art, the changing nature of work, and masculinity in Abidjan. Informed by my fieldwork with men in Abidjan’s informal economy, photographs from the field, previous research on barbershop signs, and scholarship on drivers, vehicles, and vehicular art in comparable contexts, I argue that the practice of *gbaka* portraiture is an emerging status economy in the contemporary city, speaking to processes of sociality and self-identification that rely on globalized assertions of blackness located in the mass media. I define a status economy as an economic activity

that seeks to establish status by way of consumer culture. While status economies could be part of either the formal or informal economy, the practices I describe here are solely informal. Status economies entail investment in status-bestowing material practices, thus offering an alternative to employment as a means of gaining distinction. Seeking status, actors transform supralocal cultural references into material practices that buttress local identities. Examining the politics of representation in these status economies tracks the dollars and dreams on Africa's urban periphery.

*Gbakas* are instructive because they offer an essential service on the urban periphery and are prominent sites to display an urban popular cultural sensibility. Drivers are master navigators of the periphery, endowed with relatively high skills and capital, one of an emerging class of workers in the informal economy that offers alternatives to formerly idealized careers in the formal sector (Banégas and Warnier 2001). The paintings of iconic black men that adorn *gbakas* reference the African diaspora and serve as social signals within Abidjan. They present an alternative narrative of masculinity that celebrates identities from the urban and global periphery, with blackness invoking an experience of modernity-as-alterity inseparable from the black urban experience (Matlon 2011a; Simone 2010; see also Ebron 2008; Gilroy 1993; Pierre 2013; wa-Mungai 2010). In short, *gbakas* become mobile expressions of a street art that speaks an Abidjanais and larger diasporic vernacular.

For example, Ivoirian football hero Didier Drogba became a success story in Europe and a legend in Côte d'Ivoire. Captain and all-time high scorer of the national team Les Éléphants, from 2004 until 2012 Drogba was also signed with the English Premier League team Chelsea, where he enjoyed a stunning career. Drogba remains one of the most successful African footballers in history. He now plays with the Turkish League team Galatasaray. While men from the African diaspora in Europe and Latin America have made enormous strides in football, Africans have only recently begun to appear on the world stage. Drogba stands with his arms crossed authoritatively in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Didier Drogba, Ivoirian footballer. Abidjan, June 8, 2009.

US President Barack Obama’s electoral victory was a stunning signal to black men in the United States and Africa. It raised the standards of what a black man could achieve even in politics. When Obama was elected during my fieldwork, I saw images of him go viral across Abidjan. He offered proof that the American dream, promised in glorified media images of blackness, was indeed a reality. In Figure 3 President Obama poses dignified in a suit, with American flag insignia in the background and across the side of the *gbaka*.



Figure 3. Barack Obama, US president. Abidjan, June 28, 2009.

Be he a local football hero or US president, the men—imaginaries—depicted in these portraits speak to a shared vernacular among peripheral black men globally.

### INTERSECTING FANTASY AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

To comprehend persistent urban growth despite the absence of formal work requires recognizing the prodigious power of hope and the profuse diffusion of the mass media: new urbanites seek belonging and personal distinction within a globally conceived popular culture. While the predominant argument among African urbanists is that exposure to lives lived better elsewhere may exacerbate a sense of African inferiority (Diouf 2005; Ferguson 2006; Weiss 2009), AbdouMaliq Simone (2010) argues that a global “black urbanism” offers connections, ways of being and belonging for peripheral subjects that reconfigure their denigrated identities. Although formally black urbanites have had to make other people’s histories, simultaneously they have adopted “shadow-like” (Simone 2010:299) strategies to survive on the periphery and to tell their own stories (see also Kelley 2002). Their “experiences provide an incisive platform for coming to grips with the combination of possibility and precariousness

that seems to be at the forefront of urban life” (Simone 2010:281). In particular, they have drawn on “mediascapes” that offer “image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality” of their lives and those elsewhere (Appadurai 1990:9).

Mediascapes generate narrative accounts of reality that inform local interpretations of transatlantic popular cultural practices. They offer “elements—of speech, gesture, and materials” that “provide a haven for people’s passions to live differently” (Simone 2010:316). In Abidjan, clothing and other items bearing US currency were particularly valued on the urban periphery, so that these symbols of wealth become stand-ins for wealth itself; indeed, such items actually cost more in the second-hand market (Matlon 2011b). And men who lacked dignifying work could nevertheless garner status via performative identities, often assuming the names of hip-hop artists and other celebrities (Matlon 2011a). One especially loved artist in Abidjan is 50 Cent, his name invoking US currency. On the *gbaka* in Figure 4, 50 Cent looks tough in his signature do-rag and backwards baseball cap.



Figure 4. 50 Cent, American rapper. Abidjan, August 6, 2009.

Though derived from the specific life experiences of and interrelationships between Africans and the diaspora, black urbanism depicts the generalized experience of the Other pushed to the periphery and how that Other has survived and inscribed his/her stories into urban life. Their histories of the city involve underground economies and creative innovations in social and cultural life that have reverberated back to the center, even if those contributions often go unacknowledged. Black urbanism describes an experience that, despite the continued glorification of a distant ideal predicated on wage labor and a singular account of modernity, represents the new status quo. Proliferating informality inevitably accompanies new qualities for residents to valorize (Banégas and Warnier 2001; Newell 2012). The hard-knock life that

constitutes reality on the periphery necessitates thrift: making do without and the seedy negotiation of the hustler. The “bluff,” consuming so as to blur reality and fiction and to temporarily become a “more potent social bein[g]” (Newell 2012:178), is in this context an Abidjanais social institution. Looking or playing the part is the next best thing to being it.

## **MEDIA BLACKNESS AND MASCULINE IDEALS ON ABIDJAN'S PERIPHERY**

In the new century, Abidjan's informal economy employed an estimated 75 percent of the working population (Union Économique et Monétaire Ouest-Africaine 2001–2002). While nearly a decade of civil war<sup>3</sup> that ended in 2011 makes these the most recent figures available, they do not reflect the destructive effects of the conflict, which included further concentration of populations in Côte d'Ivoire's urban centers and the flight of international employers. They do, however, indicate the outcome of two decades of decline: thus, one survey in Abidjan found the proportion of salaried men drop from 57 percent in 1979 to 29 percent in 1992 (Le Pape 1997:90). Since steady and dignifying formal work has become a scarce commodity, Abidjan's newest arrivals often disperse into urban peripheries as anonymous quasi-citizens supporting themselves via piecemeal activities that vary day by day. In such contexts, the lifestyles and livelihoods of those surviving on the urban periphery<sup>4</sup> have been characterized as “invisible” (De Boeck and Plissart 2006; Matlon 2011b; Simone 2004).

Côte d'Ivoire's population is over one-quarter foreign, and half of Abidjan is composed of migrants (Institut National de la Statistique 2001). Migrants, foreigners, and locals are highly stratified by occupation. Historically, foreigners and northerners living in the city participated in informal trades, while southern Ivoirians, among them Abidjanais, dominated the civil service, itself the largest employer in the formal sector for the first decades of independence and the route to middle-class life (Le Pape 1997; Matlon 2014; Ministère de l'Économie et des Finances 2007; Newell 2012; Woods 1988). Postcolonial Abidjanais masculinity was particularly attached to an image of work that involved a suit, a briefcase, and an air-conditioned office, and Abidjanais sociality denigrated men who failed to approximate these models (Matlon 2011a; Newell 2012). Indeed, during the high point of what was lauded as

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<sup>3</sup> Côte d'Ivoire was officially split between a rebel-controlled north and government-controlled south from 2002 until 2011. However, the first military conflict, a coup d'état, occurred in 1999. The first presidential elections in ten years were held in November 2010, uprooting President Laurent Gbagbo and appointing President Alassane Ouattara.

<sup>4</sup> I draw from Simone's (2010) elaboration of the “periphery” to denote: precariousness and insecurity in livelihood strategy; a socioeconomic location vis-à-vis global capital; a socioeconomic location in particular urban economies and neighborhoods; the consolidation of urban experiences from a peripheral position—particularly blackness—to underscore commonality across disparate contexts; and the practices and dynamics that these urbanites have come to adopt and which resonate across contexts.

the “Ivoirian miracle,” an initial period of remarkable economic growth from independence until the mid-1980s, Abidjanais men who were financially well endowed used their economic power to dominate their households and were loath to allow their wives to engage in remunerative activities (Vidal 1977). Structural adjustment and the economic downturn that hit raw material–dependent sub-Saharan Africa in the 1980s struck at the heart of the Ivoirian miracle, translating into “*la crise general du salariat*” (the general crisis of the salaried worker) that disproportionately affected men’s incomes (Le Pape 1997:98; see also Matlon 2011b). Families were left with a heightened dependence on women’s earnings from informal activities like preparing homemade meals, selling vegetables, or bartering fabrics in the market. But men who participated in similar activities were stigmatized (Le Pape 1997).

Therefore, in addition to the generalized denigration of the informal sector in postcolonial Africa, it holds an especially low place in Abidjanais hierarchies, where it is conflated not only with feminized work but also that of migrants. This schema typecasts workers in informal activities as outsiders poorly adapted to urban social mores. It is in this context that I consider the relationship between informality and status in contemporary Abidjan, as well as alternatives to a work-based masculinity. I will return to the former in the next section. I restrict my discussion here to alternative constructions of masculinity that rely on media portrayals of blackness. For the purposes of my broader analysis however it is important to keep in mind that both the proliferation of informal activities on Abidjan’s periphery and the global popularity of media blackness contribute to *gbaka* portrait art.

Among Francophone West Africans, Ivoirians are reputed for their consumerist ethos associated with Western lifestyles (Newell 2012; Touré 1981; Vidal 1977). Having embraced the Francophone colonial appellation *évolué* (evolved), on several occasions I heard men proudly refer to Ivoirians as “civilized” Africans. This definition of “civilized” strongly associates the modernization project with Ivoirian economic success as compared to its regional neighbors. Material accumulation on the individual scale reinforced the sense of Ivoirian development as a *fait accompli*. But in the absence of a coveted job in the civil service, disposable income for a newly imported automobile or the ability to maintain a stay-at-home wife, media circulations of modernity’s imaginaries in quotidian Abidjan consist of, to name a few, the highly popular *coupé décalé* music, the plethora of knock-off luxury brands, and portraits of global black men on *gbakas*. These global circulations continue to imply parallels between civilization and material accumulation and offer an alternative pathway to modernity.

The likelihood of media stardom is as distant—or close—as that of salaried work. Its relative closeness makes it appear to be a tangible strategy for material accumulation in contemporary Abidjan, and success stories like Ivoirian reggae legend Alpha Blondy inspire imaginations. After a stint studying in the United States, in the 1980s Alpha Blondy made his musical debut in Côte d’Ivoire, soon emerging as the “Bob Marley of Africa.” He sings in the same languages used for the local slang *Nouchi*: French, Dioula, and English (Newell 2012). A wildly successful local artist, at the height of his career he ran, according to my informants’ reports, a private car service for Abidjan’s elite. Alpha Blondy’s music is still popular in Ivoirian nightclubs and

has won awards internationally. In Figure 5, Alpha Blondy leans forward, palms crossed as if expressing gratitude to his countrymen. In the background are the colors, orange and green, of the national flag.



Figure 5. Alpha Blondy, Ivoirian reggae legend. Abidjan, August 13, 2009.

In Abidjan, media blackness presents a way of being in the city that accepts the material-economic primacy of this vision of modernity yet affirms an identity that is not white but black. Moreover, the racialized and gendered affinity between Abidjanais men and their local celebrities abroad or renowned members of the African diaspora at home, affirmed by common origins and dispositions, asserts belonging to an iteration of manhood for men otherwise left behind as producers and, thus, providers. By elevating a black transatlantic iteration of modernity, Abidjanais contest the French cultural hegemony that, by way of celebrating their achieved Occidentalism, dominated a first generation of independent Ivoirians (see Matlon 2011a; Newell 2012). Materialism embedded with blackness thus reflects, in addition to the generally peripheral position of black men globally, the particularly Ivoirian postcolonial experience. While the US model of blackness may be the most familiar—and dominant—register within global black popular culture, the black urbanism I describe here originates from both sides of the Atlantic.

## MASTER NAVIGATORS OF THE PERIPHERY

The rapid and informalized expansion of cities in the Global South has generated vast peripheral spaces whose residents lack private vehicles and governments cannot provide sufficient mass transit options to connect these neighborhoods. Transportation services such as *gbakas* fill this need, thus figuring as crucial nodes within the urban

economy.<sup>5</sup> Reflecting the denigrated spaces and populations they service, Mbugua wa-Mungai (2010:118) writes, “Broadly speaking, to think about *matatu* [Nairobi’s *gbaka* equivalents] is to confront a history of illegitimacy, marginality, and ultimately, survival.” *Matatus* figure into the lexicon of peripheral urbanism as archetypal and often caricatured urban transport: makeshift, rule-breaking, and disorderly if not chaotic (Mutongi 2006; wa-Mungai 2010). Despite their stigma, they are necessary urban services and require a thorough knowledge of the city and a certain fearlessness to operate. They go where other vehicles don’t and are among few affordable transportation options for the urban poor. Depending on distance traveled, a *gbaka* ride in Abidjan costs between 200 and 350 CFA francs, compared to a taxi whose driver will rarely negotiate any ride for less than 1,000 CFA francs (using the official meter costs substantially more).<sup>6</sup> *Gbaka* drivers work long hours, and their days are stressful, spent carefully negotiating busy, polluted roads and haggling with clients. Instead of receiving wages, they are paid from what they make soliciting passengers. Their earnings are thus unsteady and uncertain. According to *gbaka* driver Bamba Morris, after paying a set rate of his day’s earnings to the vehicle’s owner, he can expect to take home between 6,000 and 8,000 CFA francs (Abidjan.net 2010). Driver Diakité Mamadou reports that he earns 35,000 CFA francs per month working days that are more than half as long as that of an ordinary salaried worker. The vehicle owner expects him to bring in 23,000 CFA francs daily, after which he may keep the surplus (Tanoh 2010).<sup>7</sup> Comparatively, 2002 figures report average monthly earnings in the informal sector to be 40,000 CFA francs.<sup>8</sup> In the private formal sector and the public sector, average monthly earnings were 146,000 and 256,000 CFA francs, respectively (Institut National de la Statistique 2003).

Despite these negative characteristics, driving a *gbaka* demands skills and capital that surpass those of most other informal trades—like the ubiquitous street vending that many men take up and which requires no savings or experience. Even compared to barbers or shopkeepers who are also held in relatively high esteem, *gbaka* drivers are entrusted with operating a costly investment (if they do not own it themselves). For these reasons they have relatively high status among informal workers. In particular, young men with limited opportunities dream of driving and especially of

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<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of the crucial role these forms of transport play in Kenya and Angola, see Mutongi (2006) and Lopes (2009), respectively.

<sup>6</sup> At the time of my research, the exchange rate was approximately 500 CFA francs for \$1. To provide an idea of costs on Abidjan’s periphery, a budget meal can be as little as 150 CFA francs, while a more sumptuous grilled chicken and sides will cost upwards of 2,500 CFA francs. A haircut costs 300; a basic room might cost 10,000 CFA francs per month.

<sup>7</sup> Drivers typically do not own their vehicles and are expected to pay a substantial amount of their profit to the boss/owner (see also Mutongi 2006).

<sup>8</sup> While this driver reports earnings less than the average for the informal sector, I still suggest that *gbaka* drivers are relatively high status. Indeed, as noted previously the informal economy comprises private businesses as well, which can be highly lucrative despite the fact that they do not operate formally. Most work is, however, low earning and unsteady. Some mobile vendors with whom I spoke reported going weeks without a single sale.

owning a vehicle (Van der Geest 2009). Although their conditions are often precarious, driving professionally offers a rare chance for “professional and social integration” in difficult environments such as “civil war, unemployment and an economy and infrastructure that have ground to a halt” (Lopes 2009:125). Elodie Vermeil, Dominique Auzias, and Jean-Paul Labourdette (2008:153) report that popular Ivoirian reggae artist Tiken Jah Fakoly financed the production of his first album as a *balanceur*: a young man, often in his teens, paid to solicit *gbaka* passengers. Such work can be used to “complement another profession and, for many young Ivoirian *débrouillards* (survivors/those trying to get by), this activity is as good as any to get through the month.” In the case of Nairobi, Kenda Mutongi (2006) finds that the high unemployment has led relatively educated men to join *matatu* crews where they can earn 50 percent more per month than clerks. She concludes that, “These conductors—young, educated, and more importantly, with money—are increasingly becoming desirable boyfriends for some young women in Nairobi” (Mutongi 2006:557). At the same time, however, passengers “tended to insult conductors for no apparent reason, calling them ‘jobless,’ ‘untidy,’ ‘uneducated,’ and ‘good for nothing people’” (565). Their simultaneously ascendant and derided status points to the ambivalent position drivers have in the social lexicon of a continent with a rapidly changed work regime.

Describing the pervasive theme of power in Nigerian truck art, Jack Pritchett explains that, “Since its introduction into Nigeria, the automobile has been a strong status symbol, a preserve of the titled, the influential and the wealthy” (1979:31). Further, since the “authoritative occupation of masculine [public] space has traditionally been contingent upon males’ assumption and retention of control over economic and/or other resources” (wa-Mungai 2010:123), the ability to occupy the road imbues a certain masculine prowess. *Gbaka* drivers especially personify the masculinity of the thrifty hustler: rough and survivalist, with a powerful physical presence. They are street-smart, knowing how to navigate those gritty spaces on the periphery where “rules are not written in clear signage but understood collectively through the trials and errors of time and experience” (Matlon 2011a:402).

## THE STATUS ECONOMY OF *GBAKA* PORTRAITURE

In “Driving While Black,” Paul Gilroy (2001) discusses the relationship between blackness and driving in the US context. He suggests that cars have played a significant but understudied role in “the black vernacular and subaltern social life,” especially when considering the prolific power of consumer culture, and argues that American blacks’ “distinctive history of propertylessness and material deprivation has inclined them towards a disproportionate investment in particular forms of property that are publicly visible and the status that corresponds to them” (Gilroy 2001:82, 84). In other words, the fascination with cars relates to “an unsubversive will to triumph in the game of consumerism and to make consumer citizenship and its brand identities eclipse the merely political forms of belonging promoted by governments and political processes” (85). Blackness today, Gilroy contends, is “less an index of hurt, resistance or solidarity in the face of persistent and systematic in-

equality than one more faintly exotic life-style 'option' conferred by the multi-cultural alchemy of heavily branded commodities and the pre-sealed, 'ethnic' identities that apparently match them" (86). Considering how "globalizing black culture has repeatedly oriented towards north American standards, desires and passions," he argues that the relationship between American blacks and blacks elsewhere "can be seen in the way that automobiles become more than either simply tools or signs" (100). I argued above that black urbanism is a transatlantic, urban counterculture that emerged out of life on the periphery. Nevertheless, because US blackness simultaneously represents hegemony and counterhegemony, it acts as a powerful ambassador to a broader postcolonial identity (Matlon 2011a). With these thoughts in mind, I turn to *gbaka* portraiture as a status economy that weaves together both the driver's productive identity and vernaculars of black urbanism that draw on the media's social imaginaries from Africa and across the African diaspora.

While it is clear that black urbanism generates global and local connections, a detailed examination of the material consequences of these connections in terms of everyday social relations on the urban periphery is lacking, opening space for future research. In particular, there is a lack of research on the connection between how men instrumentalize this media blackness and status economies. *Gbaka* portrait art demonstrates one way that peripheral Abidjanais men's search for status has generated both a cultural movement and an affiliated economy. It is beyond the scope of this article to fully explore the economics of *gbaka* portraiture; however in what remains I consider the nexus between this mobile street art, the informal economy, and black masculinity.

*Gbaka* portraiture constitutes a form of ephemeral, popular art with equivalents around the world. As part of Abidjan's visual landscape, these handcrafted signs are produced in the same style as barbershop signs and advertisements for other informal trades.<sup>9</sup> Handmade signs appear most often in peripheral neighborhoods and contrast with the printed signage found in Abidjan's upscale districts (Matlon 2011a). Their repeated themes "offer visual evidence of a [common] vernacular" on the urban periphery (Matlon 2011a:381). However, because *gbaka* drivers often rent, rather than own, their vehicles, it is not always them who have commissioned the paintings. The art nevertheless lends an air of distinction to the vehicles and becomes part of the driver's overall persona. In their association with the images, drivers popularize the practice as a status economy. Kiprop Lagat refers to *matatus* as "moving artwork" (2010:62), and Mutongi describes them in this way: "Highly individualized, with paint jobs ranging from somber black to a Rubik's cube assortment of colours, or the sort of airbrushed creations normally reserved for prison tattoos or subway graffiti, they look like anything but assembly line products" (2006:550). In a similar vein Pritchett says that Nigerian trucks "have become the canvas of a thriving, gaudy new art form" (1979:27). Scholars have further noted the relationship between vehicular art and social identity. In Pakistan, Jamal J. Elias emphasizes its importance in relation to personal and collective identity, such that it "carries in it and on it an array of cul-

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<sup>9</sup> For a collection of hand painted African sign art, see Floor and van Zanten (2010). A description of this artistic practice is available in Matlon (2011a) and more fully in Lerat (1992).

tural messages and expectations" (2011:11), while Brenda Jo Bright (1995) contextualizes vehicular art as a site of subcultural expression among Chicanos in the United States. Robert Farris Thompson writes that buses known in Haiti as *tap-taps* "heighten" the country "with their rainbow colors" (1996:36–37) that reflect an Afro-Atlantic mindset. As part of a "new national mode of painting" that began to proliferate on the streets of Port-au-Prince in the late 1940s, Thompson speaks for the artists when he says, "The way we live has a certain rhythm, and we will take our palette and paint that rhythm in your Parisian-powdered face" (44). In related literatures, analyses of African vehicular art practices include James L. Brain's (1968) writings on slogans on buses and trucks in Tanzania, Eugenia Date-Bah's (1980) on inscriptions on Ghanaian vehicles, Thomas Blom Hansen's (2006) on music in South African public transportation, Lagat's (2010) on popular culture surrounding buses in Kenya, Pritchett's (1979) on Nigerian truck art, Sjaak van der Geest's (2009) on inscriptions on Ghanaian trucks, and wa-Mungai's (2010) on the music in Kenyan buses. Van der Geest (2009) describes how in Ghana the popular Highlife musician Nana Ampadu wrote "Driverfo," a 1985 ode to lorry drivers. Similarly, Ivoirian musician Daouda le Sentimental produced the popular song "Les gbakas d'Abidjan" in 1976, which may be heard on YouTube as "Gbaka roulé."<sup>10</sup> A mix of French and *Nouchi*, the song provides a veritable overview of *gbaka* practices, Abidjan's social geography, and indicates how deeply *gbakas* are infused into the local vernacular. Daouda begins with the lines,

*Moi, j'habite en la banlieue* (Me, I live on the outskirts)  
*Je suis aux Six Plateaux* (I am in "Six Plateau"<sup>11</sup>)  
*Tous les gens de là-bas* (Everyone from there)  
*Se déplacent en gbaka* (Travels in the *gbaka*)  
*Les gbakas d'Abidjan* (The *gbakas* of Abidjan)  
*Arrangent bien des gens* (Help people out a lot)  
*En tout cas moi, Daouda* (In any case me, Daouda)  
*Je prends souvent le gbaka* (I often take the *gbaka*)

The album cover features a caricatured drawing of Daouda at the wheel of a *gbaka*, guitar and hand hanging out the window. A passenger seated shotgun gives a thumbs up, and legs and arms with no clearly identifiable owner protrude out the vehicle's rear doors. Another passenger rides on the roof, atop luggage and baskets of food (including a leaping fish). The windshield is cracked, and smoke rises from the engine. This depiction exaggerates the unruly and informal nature of *gbaka* transportation.

Of the decoration and naming practices of *matatus*, wa-Mungai explains that affiliation with American, and especially black, media tropes call to mind the crews' "dreams of fame, glitz and money. This category of representation can be explained as a coping mechanism, if not outright escapism, for those youths whose daily encounters

<sup>10</sup> <https://youtu.be/EYfld70llyw>.

<sup>11</sup> Plateau is Abidjan's well-built administrative center. Deux Plateau is one Abidjan's elite residential neighborhoods; Six Plateau is a parody denoting the periphery.

with poverty, joblessness and crime, among other dreary realities, make them desire some relief, however temporary" (2010:120). In Abidjan, *gbakas* mobilize global tropes as social cues, intersecting fantasy and lived experience (see also Matlon 2011a). In doing so, they embody familiar black media identities. Drivers, themselves positioned as cultural renegades helping to define a generational vernacular, appropriately transport images of iconic black men across the city. Like those of the *matatu* crews, the worlds described in these men's performative identities and personal biographies are "made to speak ... powerfully to local dilemmas" (wa-Mungai 2010:132).

The *gbaka* in Figure 6 renders homage to the musical style Desi (spelled here "Dezy"), developed by DJ Shizzio—most likely the man in the image—as South Asians' answer to hip-hop in the United Kingdom. While not of African descent, Britain's South Asian population's history of colonization and marginalization legitimates the political-cultural claim of a shared "black" identity. Indeed, the hybridized Desi identity draws on African-American tropes of blackness and masculinity to position South Asian minorities in Britain (Drissel 2011). It is no great leap to see that Desi has in turn inspired peripheral Abidjanais men.



Figure 6. Dezy [Desi], a form of hip-hop in the United Kingdom innovated by members of the South Asian diaspora, developed by DJ Shizzio. Abidjan, August 13, 2009.

The brand identity of a global luxury good becomes inseparable from an Abidjanais icon in Figures 7 and 8, which feature *coupé décalé* musician Douk Saga and D&G for Italian designer Dolce & Gabbana, and, like many of the portraits, they are infused with the Ivoirian national colors. Douk Saga, along with other men known collectively as the Jet Set, was the progenitor of *coupé décalé*, Côte d'Ivoire's proudest cultural export. A veritable example of the Ivoirian diaspora's cultural ties, Ivoirian émigrés developed *coupé décalé* in Paris nightclubs and brought it back to the streets

of Abidjan and across West and Central Africa in the early 2000s. It has since become the region’s dominant popular musical style. Adding to his legacy, Douk Saga was renowned for distributing money to audiences when he performed. Abidjanais lore has it that he only wore D&G. Since Douk Saga, D&G has proliferated as the brand of choice on Abidjan’s streets, appearing both as “authentic” D&G but also as an obvious replica on jewelry, local fabrics, sandals, and as an affectionate designator for *gbakas* (Matlon 2011b).



Figure 7. Douk Saga, legendary Ivoirian *coupé décalé* musician. Abidjan, August 13, 2009.



Figure 8. Side view of *gbaka* with Douk Saga and “D&G” for Italian designer Dolce & Gabbana. Abidjan, August 13, 2009.

*Gbaka* portraits masculinize the cityscape, providing visibility to black masculinity generally but also to drivers specifically, themselves underemployed workers in Abidjan's informal economy. Depictions of popular black media figures—full participants in the global economy with distinct approaches to an urban lifestyle—affirm men who are not classifiable as (working, productive) men. The prominence of local celebrities reflects the enduring pride of an Abidjanais identity. As a normative backdrop in Abidjan's peripheral neighborhoods, *gbaka* images clearly resonate with everyday men while also demonstrating imaginaries of an ideal-typical masculinity. I relate this to the fact that, despite dominating public space, peripheral Abidjanais men are invisible, or at least insignificant, as actors in the public sphere: as community members, husbands and fathers, and as workers (Matlon 2011b). I suggest that the hypervisibility of men who are renowned media personalities via *gbaka* portraiture is a response to Abidjanais men's own marginalization. It is with this in mind that I have interpreted these images' significance for peripheral Abidjanais masculinity.

## BLACK MASCULINITY VINDICATED

France's colonizing mission sought to make Africans into men by whitewashing their blackness with French culture. In Abidjan, as in other African metropolises, access to wage labor was the key means by which men assumed a modern, "civilized" identity. Material accumulation was and continues to be another way of being modern. Media imagery celebrating black men's performative and consumerist potential offers peripheral urbanites a way to express their allegiance to modernity. When men embrace these imaginaries, they personify those black men who have fashioned careers out of their own hypervisibility in the media world. A singularly potent signifier, blackness indicates both peripheral subjectivity and, as a dominant register in popular culture, the embodiment of modernity-as-alterity. Rejecting colonialism's gendered narrative that associated wage labor with manhood, this racial register asserts a masculinity that is civilized and black.

The shared blackness of the men featured in *gbaka* portraits establishes a vernacular among drivers and everyday Abidjanais men. *Gbaka* portraits thus become expressions of popular culture that originate out of black urbanity, and the material investment required for these expressions to take form constitutes a status economy. By exploring the status economy of *gbaka* portraiture in this article, I have begun tracking the dollars and dreams of men on Abidjan's periphery: dollars, as the portraits comprise a creative industry that has risen to complement and enhance the essential services that *gbakas* provide, and dreams, as a connection to a media blackness promising limitless possibilities. Simone writes that blackness denotes a "conceptual solidarity" for those otherwise excluded from normative ways of living in and navigating the city; it indicates survival within "undocumented worlds of limited visibility thought to haunt the city's modernity" (2010:285). As the *gbaka* traverses Abidjan's periphery, the portraits embellishing the vehicles move through the imagined realm of black urbanism.

For men in Abidjan's informal economy, the likelihood of finding formal work is as improbable as that of becoming the next Michael Jackson or Didier Drogba. *Gbaka* portraits are points of access not only to a social imaginary where men from the African diaspora and Abidjan's own dominate media circuits, but also to the everyday exchanges that constitute the Abidjanais vernacular. *Gbaka* portraits remind those struggling of their own potentialities and indicate how Abidjanais men construct public alter egos inspired by media icons of black masculinity.

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# ВОТ ТАК МЫ КАТИМСЯ: СТАТУСНАЯ ЭКОНОМИКА АВТОБУСНОЙ ПОРТРЕТНОЙ ЖИВОПИСИ НА ГОРОДСКОЙ ПЕРИФЕРИИ В ЧЕРНОЙ АФРИКЕ

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*Я хочу поблагодарить участников и организаторов ежегодной конференции Ассоциации африканских исследований, конференции в Институте африканских исследований при Университете Ганы (в Легоне), Европейской конференции по африканским исследованиям и ежегодной конференции Международной ассоциации визуальной социологии в 2013 году, где я имела возможность представить более ранние версии этой работы. Я благодарю редакторов этого тематического выпуска журнала Laboratorium Оксану Запорожец и Наталью Самутину, редакцию и анонимных рецензентов журнала за ценные замечания, и отдельно – Карлоса Кармону Медину. Данное исследование было проведено благодаря щедрой поддержке Национального научного фонда США (NSF) и Национального агентства по науке Франции (ANR-Labex IAST).*

Дефицит рабочих мест в официальном секторе экономики городской Африки лишает многих мужчин возможности достичь идеализированной современной маскулинности, ассоциирующейся со стабильно оплачиваемой работой по найму. Чтобы повысить свой статус, они прибегают к ряду практик, оспаривающих господствующий нарратив маскулинности. Одной из таких практик является использование образов культовых чернокожих героев, апеллирующих к опыту «современности-как-иначе», характерному для всей глобальной африканской диаспоры. Акторы трансформируют наднациональные культурные модели в материальные практики с целью укрепления местных идентичностей. В статье вводится концепт статусной экономики, который используется для анализа политики репрезентации, эксплуатирующей доллары и мечты на африканской городской периферии. Я рассматриваю портретную живопись на мини-автобусах «гбака» (*gbaka*) как пример статусной экономики в Абиджане, крупнейшем городе Кот-д'Ивуара. В работе также исследуется связь между изображениями, изменяющимся режимом занятости и маскулинностью, позволяющая понять культурное движение и связанную с ним экономику, порождаемую стремлением мужчин с периферии повысить свой статус.

**Ключевые слова:** африканский урбанизм; Кот-д'Ивуар; неформальная экономика; маскулинность; статус; передвижная живопись (аэрография)