Godrap Girls, Draou Boys, and the Sexual Economy of the Bluff in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire
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Godrap Girls, Draou Boys, and the Sexual Economy of the Bluff in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire

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ABSTRACT In Abidjan, both economic and sexual exchanges are structured around the bluff, a mimetic performance of modern urban identity that is both a form of deception and a means of social transformation. Men and women attempt to seduce each other through the bluff and exploit the relationship for material gain. While marriage is held up as an ideal, it is increasingly elusive as kinship has come to mimic the peer networks of the informal economy. Like drag, the bluff collapses oppositions between appearance and reality, highlighting the performative aspects of ‘modernity’. I suggest that widespread urban sexual antagonism may be constructed around gendered performative consumption, such that the impossible demands of maintaining a deceptive appearance of success produces sexual exploitation and anxiety on both sides of the gender divide.

KEYWORDS Sex, kinship, economy, mimesis, performance

Urban gender relationships in Abidjan are structured around a particular model of informal economy, or what I will call here the economy of bluff. Just as many people’s incomes were built on or ameliorated by cons, hustles, and theft, sexual relationships were understood by both genders as potential attempts to scam the partner out of as much as possible. During my fieldwork between 2000 and 2001, men exhibited a paralyzing fear of women’s ability to consume resources, while women considered men untrustworthy and self-serving. While long-term partnerships were not uncommon, mutual suspicion and financial expropriation were the modus operandi of sexual relationships. At the same time, such relationships were essential to the performance of personal success: having a boyfriend or girlfriend – or better yet, several – was a way of gaining prestige in a hierarchical society of reputation. I argue here that Ivoirian urban sexual antagonism was based
upon a performance of conspicuous consumption called the *bluff*, which is simultaneously esteemed as an illusion of success and demonstration of urban savvy, while feared for its ability to exploit the innocent who fail to penetrate the projected appearance of things. This model, I suggest, is the basis for both economic production and sexual relationships in urban Côte d'Ivoire. In other words, sex and economy parallel each other because they are shaped by the same underlying structure of exchange. The bluff, however, is not a simple projection, for it is explicitly an attempt to model both the self and sexual relationships upon an imagined modern ‘other,’ that is, the Ivoirian understanding of the ‘West.’ Thus, Ivoirian desire is culturally shaped by a mimesis of gendered economic roles through which Ivoirians understand ‘Western’ romantic relations, in which the man pays and the woman receives. Following Bashkow, I believe that it is crucial to understand the transnational phenomenon of the ‘whiteman’ as a local culturally constructed other, as well as the role this particular construction of otherness plays in local understandings of self in transnational context (Bashkow 2006). ‘Premier Gaou’ by Magic System, probably the best-selling Ivoirian singer to date, explores precisely this intergender tension over consumption. A key aspect of this song is the idea that the man that falls victim to a woman’s consuming desires is a *gaou*. *Gaou* is a slang term referring to the victim of a scam or robbery, but also describes their lack of intelligence and ‘uncivilized qualities’. It can be used as a synonym for peasant or hick, and those who dress poorly. It is opposed to *yere*, which comes from the Dioula for ‘open,’ means to ‘see clearly,’ to scam, to dress stylishly, and to detect others attempts to exploit them. *Yere* refers to the possession of urban savvy. It can also be used to describe objects and items of clothing themselves, to differentiate the valuable and hip from the outdated and worthless. This opposition was of crucial importance to the social organization and cultural models of Ivoirian youth who identify themselves as *Nouchi*, a word meaning ‘hoodlum’ or ‘bandit’ but also referring to urban slang, coolness, and the ability to survive by one’s wits. Much like Ferguson’s ‘cosmopolitans’ (1999), the term excludes those who symbolically distance themselves from urban style, especially those who identify themselves with northern, predominantly Muslim culture. This cultural opposition, which was to become crucial to the civil crisis that followed soon after my departure in 2001, was reinforced by the performance of the bluff, in which audiences distinguished who was a true urban citizen from those that were merely residents.
It was in poverty that the girl Antou left me.
Back when I had a little, morning, noon and night,
We were together on the Rue Princesse [a prestigious nightlife district],
At Mille-Maquis, Sanfrofi, she was hanging out,
The money ran out, Antou changed sides,
Warri bana ['broke' in Dioula] she changed boyfriends

Thank God for me, I knew how to sing a little,
I made a cassette, you could see me on TV,
Morning, Noon, and night it was me singing on the radio,
Antou saw that, she said, the gaou [fool] has struck gold.
Hold on, I'll go scam him.
Chorus: But, they say the first gaou is not gaou,
It's the second gaou that is gnata [The first time you are duped, its not foolish, but the second time a fool, you’re an idiot].

Sunday morning, knock knock, there is someone at my door,
To my great surprise, I see the girl Antou there
Out of politeness I say ‘It's been a long time’
She wants to lie to me, she says ‘dear, I was traveling
Now I have returned, and I belong to you
Take me cadeau [free of obligation], whatever you want
Chorus

So I said ‘darling, what would you like to eat?’
Without even hesitating she said grilled chicken
I said ‘darling, you want to eat chicken,
But a chicken is too small, it could not satisfy you,
a grilled alligator, I'll give to you
stewed elephant, that's what you will eat

She got mad, she said she's going back home,
But if she goes home, coagulation will kill me
I asked for her forgiveness, and she accepted
But a moment later, she ruined everything
She gave up on chicken and started in on alloko [fried plantains]
'If you want alloko, its no problem
it is a plantation of bananas you will need to grill
Instead of forks, they don’t spear well enough,
It's with a pitchfork you will eat.
They say the first gaou is not gaou
It’s the second gaou that’s an idiot.
The implications of these categories for relations between the sexes is expressed in one male youth’s explanation for why people enjoyed visiting their family village so much:

The village girls want guys who are yere, who know the city. So we go and can pick the very youngest ones because that is what guys like. But when the girls get to the city everything changes. They look for guys who are gaou because they are afraid of the yere. They can get what they want from a gaou, take him for all his money, whereas a yere will wriggle out of it.

Here we see the expression of gender conflict as an area in which the local cosmology of modernity is played out. In the economy of the bluff, only those who have mastered urban styles of life and the art of both tricking and avoiding being the victim of a trick will survive and prosper. This was the source of street hierarchy between men, but it was also a central tension between men and women, who attempted to outplay each other in the game of sexual exploitation.

In the song ‘Premier Gaou’, Antou is a scheming gold-digger who dumps the singer when he is poor and comes back when she hears he has made it big. When he tests her motives, she demands food, and the song emphasizes women’s insatiable physical appetite, a superhuman ability to consume. But even as the chorus asserts men’s ability to resist women, the protagonist does not send Antou away when he discovers her deception, for he fears that ‘coagulation’ will kill him. Ivoirian men believed that if they did not have sex often enough, their semen would condense and become blocked, causing illness and even death. The song thus affirms men’s vulnerability to women’s seduction, even when they are aware of the beguilement.

**Sex and Money: Urbanization and Gender Roles**

In the face of such a story, some might read this antagonistic state of affairs as the product of globalization and the encroachment of capitalism to such an extent that sexual relationships have become commodified. But this argument contradicts a long-standing and growing ethnographic literature suggesting that women’s acceptance of money or gifts for sexual favors often does not typically carry the same kind of stigma that one finds in Western society, even if sex itself very well might (Dinnan 1983; Wojcicki 2002; Undie & Benaya 2006; Hunter 2002; Cole 2004; Chernoff 2003). As Cornwall describes for Ado-Odo, Nigeria, gifts of money tend to be seen as the expression of affection; at the same time, they can be characterized as producing love, such that
when the money runs out the love will die (2002). In either instance, money is not the antithesis of sentiment, but an integral part of it, and therefore it would be a projection of western values to describe ‘transactional sex’ in urban Africa as the result of a process of commodification.

At the same time, a principal and widespread effect of rural–urban migration seems to have been a decline in marriage rates, both as men abandon their wives and families in the village, as the pressure of urban economy made marriage financially difficult to bring about, and as urban women increasingly put off marriage in favor of the lucrative work of being a ‘girlfriend’ (Hansen 1984; Hunter 2002; Wojcicki 2002; Dinnan 1983). A crucial part of this urban transformation seems to be that one of the few ways in which women could support themselves in the city was through informal sex work (not to be confused with prostitution) (Hansen 1984; Ogden 1996; Wojcicki 2002; White 1990). Social acceptance of such work varies a great deal, but in some cases women were encouraged by their families or even husbands and lovers to make money through sexual liaisons (see White 1990 and Cole 2004, especially). Marriage often could not be relied upon as a source of financial support for women and their children, since husbands could either abandon the marriage unexpectedly or siphon off funds for their other lovers, so that single and married women alike often found lovers a more expedient and reliable source of income (Cornwall 2002; Dinnan 1983; Vidal 1991).

While Abidjan’s sexual interrelations confirm much of the above literature, the cultural construction of the bluff as a form of consumption, an operation of the informal or ‘second’ economy (MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000), and as a form of interaction between men and women offers insight into the way in which urban gender operations around money can be rethought in terms of consumption and performance. This perspective not only helps us to understand the ways in which urban African gender relations are forged through financial transactions and display, but also the way they are constructed around the imagination of Western models of gender as actors consume across cultural boundaries.

The difficulty of marriage, economic pressure of the urban milieu, and ethnically mixed nature of urban settlement in Côte d’Ivoire transformed kinship in the city from a variety of corporate groups based on lineal descent systems towards more flexible networks of relations, requiring the maintenance of relationships through person-to-person exchange, much as in Stack’s description of 1960s lower class African–American kinship (1974), in which chains of female kin and fictive kin ties were maintained through
gift exchange and childcare services. Abidjan’s networks were organized around a system of moral economy in which social capital was prioritized over financial capital (Newell 2006), and the bluff’s use of commodities as symbols of success was primarily about the production of larger and more influential networks of support (either of kin or peers). The antagonism of sexual relationships stemmed from the divergent forms of access each gender had to these support networks, and the ways in which each tried to profit from their influence over the other to make use of such access. Thus, the contemporary construction of heterosexual relationships in Abidjan was as much a product of local structures of economy as it was influenced by capitalist processes of globalization, and if acquisitiveness and self-promotion were crucial to success, it was tempered by an ethos of moral economy and the need for the support of one's family and peers. But what makes the Ivoirian bluff particularly worthy of study is the incorporation of deceitful illusion and illocutionary performance into economic transactions, gender roles, and claims to modernity.

**Treichville, Circa 2001**

This article is built upon fieldwork from 2000 and 2001 in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, and is part of a larger research project examining urban youth and postcolonial identity, focused upon the act of the bluff. I examine urban slang, criminal social networks, performative consumption, and migration as emergent popular cultures contributing to a new grassroots national identity that contributed to the disastrous divisions of the ensuing civil crisis (Newell in press). Abidjan is a city of over four million people and formerly an economic capital of the West African region. I lived in a part of town called Treichville, the first part of the city built for African habitation and one of the most diverse parts of the city (Diabate & Kodjo 1991). In the late 1980s and early 1990s it was famous for its nightclubs and gangsters, but by the time I arrived both of these had largely dissipated. Nevertheless, much of the social hierarchy and economy of this quarter was still oriented around illegal activities. Close to half the population of Treichville was immigrants from around West Africa (INS 2000), and they tended to have legitimate if low-prestige jobs selling street food, cleaning the streets, working at the port, driving taxis, and so on. Nouchi men for the most part refused this work as beneath them even as they complained that ‘foreigners’ were taking all the jobs, choosing to engage primarily with the unreliable but lucrative informal economy instead. Of course, even if the civil crisis of ensuing years has hypertrophied...
the xenophobic significance of this cultural opposition, in practice, the lines between these categories were (and continue to be) blurry, with Muslims of northern origins integrating themselves within the lifestyle and networks of urban southern Ivoirians, and some southern Ivoirians taking on menial jobs and rejecting the demands of the bluff despite the loss of reputation.

The Bluff

Urban Ivoirians used the word bluff to describe both the act of artifice and the people who performed it (les bluffeurs). Men performed the bluff in the public arena of maquis, outdoor bars in their local neighborhood. They wore American brand name clothing, each item of which could represent more than a month’s income, displaying their superiority through the competitive dance of labels [the logobi] and exaggerated physical comportment. They exposed wads of bills and bought beer for all their friends, spending everything in their pocket. They called this faire le show (to make a show). Extravagant acts of distribution in which actors bought luxurious amounts of beer and food for their friends secured loyalty even as they asserted hierarchical superiority.

Skill in the bluff was a matter of pride; a tailor friend of mine (one who made his living from forged labels) told me without a hint of irony that Ivoirians are ‘number one in the world’ in imitation. In discussions on such subjects, it was the elusive quality of ‘modernity’ that was held up above all as the virtue that was necessary to emulate. A combination of dress, attitude, physical comportment, and spendthrift practices, the bluff was not only a performance of success beyond the financial means of the actor in question, but also the display of the cultural knowledge and taste of the urbanized citizen à la Distinction (Bourdieu 1984). Such performances can produce real social transformations, increasing hierarchical superiority through reputation, and, within criminal networks, greater access to knowledge and material exchange in the informal economy. But there was a kind of aporia with the bluff that I shall explore throughout this article. It was at once based on the idea of deception and prestige of illusion, yet at the same time no one was fooled, the audience was aware of the hoax before the show even began. And yet, everyone acted as though the bluff were real. The bluff was perhaps less about the deceit its moniker indicates than a kind of public secret, in which everyone knew that things were not what they seem, but chose to act as though they were.

The audience’s awareness of fakery was irrelevant, it was the aptitude for artifice that earns respect and praise, and had transformative potential. The
Bluff was an expression of the ‘modern’ identity of the actor; their aim was not to fool others into thinking they were rich, but rather to convince them that they knew how to be rich, how to embody the identity and lifestyle of those they aspired to become. Thus, a bluffeur was someone that had truly arrived in the city, no longer a migrant laborer but a citadin, a yere urban resident. The bluff activated a hierarchical geography of modernity, an imagination of the world in which Côte d’Ivoire served as a mediating point or stepping stone between West Africa and the West, and where the West itself was subdivided and hierarchized (Newell 2005).

Nouchi collapsed all who do not match up to their standards of urban identity into the category of gaou. Automatically targeting anyone who either rejects nouchi lifestyle or has not yet learned to adapt to it as a potential victim of their scams, including thereby all rural Ivorians, those indicating their northern origins in dress, demeanor, or name, West African immigrants, or anyone who has a low-prestige job (‘proof’ of foreign origins in itself). In this sense, the bluff was a performance of exclusion, of the transcendence of these ‘uncivilized’ categories and a claim to membership in the community of modern subjects (Ferguson 2002). Indeed, these stylistic performances echo the kind of cultural dualism discussed in Ferguson’s earlier work (1999: 107), where stylistic competence is constrained to either the cosmopolitan or localist axis, but with an explicitly cultural evolutionist and increasingly xenophobic discourse hierarchizing the opposition.

Women’s access to this competitive performance space was constrained by norms of propriety: women were not supposed to go to bars unaccompanied by men. Women who ignored such norms were called godraps in urban slang, literally ‘trouble girls’. They were reputed to live off the material benefits of male attention, to be sexually promiscuous, and to drink irresponsibly. At the same time, the shrewdness, independence, and wit of the godrap were valued by men and women alike, just as the streetwise qualities of a man were considered a crucial aspect of both his masculinity and reputation.

A more generally legitimate space for the performance of feminine success was in kin-dominated life cycle rituals such as funerals, baptisms, weddings, birthdays, and religious holidays. In these spaces, they were able to let go of propriety and perform with abandon. On such occasions women were the center of social space, dominating the dance floor and outshining the men in style and constructed self-presentation. They wore elaborate hairdos, expensive tailored dresses out of hierarchically evaluated pagne material (African print cloth, the best quality being made in Europe), European shoes and purses.
Godrap Girls, Draou Boys

Here competition came to the fore, as women examined each other’s outfits carefully and evaluated them later in informal discussions with their peers. Women spent long hours preparing their appearance for such events, and any flaw or error was sure to be remarked upon.

The bluff takes on another level of significance when we examine it in relationship to gender identity. For although the bluff is a performance of Bourdieu’s cultural capital rather than of gender per se, it is also an embodied act tied directly to the gendered identity of the performer. Even if the bluff is primarily directed at members of the same sex, both men and women were explicit about the use of the bluff for seductive purposes, producing sexual access through the projection of promised economic resources and ‘civilized’ taste. In other words, to be a real modern yere ‘woman,’ one must be able to attract a man that acts like a ‘man,’ dressed in latest fashion and buying whatever she might demand. And it is this performance of masculine success that is important, not the actual ‘breadwinning’ potential of the actor.

If as Butler (1988) and de Beauvoir (1973) have argued, gender is a performance rather than an inherent identity, what does it mean when such performances take place across cultural models of gender (rather than in terms of local interpretations or constructions of the physical)? Gender, I suggest, is enacted in significant part through adornment and consumption

A bar mural depicts a bluffeur and the intended effects of his performance. Photo by the author.
(here a form of consumption that crosses cultural boundaries), thus smuggling issues of economy, class, and cultural hierarchy into gender itself and complicates Butler’s performativity by inserting a complex layered set of ‘cross-identifications’ within these spheres. In consuming across cultural boundaries Ivoirians perform the imagined gender of the Other, a different form of cross-dressing, in a sense. I will return to Butler in the end in order to consider a comparison between bluff and cross-dressing, but first I explore the intersections between urban Ivoirian kinship, gender, and economy.

**Kinship, Economy, and Gendered Social Networks**

Analyzing how domestic relationships are transformed in the urban setting, Vidal argued in *Guerre des sexes à Abidjan* that men and women find themselves in structurally antagonistic roles in a struggle over control of the economic resources of the household (1991). Her fieldwork took place during the heyday of capitalist expansion of the 1970s, when a growing middle class was able to redefine themselves in urban domestic spaces. While women were no longer necessarily the principle laborers as in the agricultural system (Etienne 1983, 1997), urban husbands expected their wives to hand over their monthly profits following village norms of cash crop agriculture, and women were reluctant to give up their only source of autonomy. To further complicate the matter, many men felt that ideally, they would prefer that their wives stay home and take charge of the household, leaving him to provide/control all financial income: ‘when the husband’s revenue [alone] is enough to maintain the household, it is not rare for him to forbid his wife or wives to work’ (Vidal 1991:135). Abidjan’s domestic spaces were thus modeled upon an imagined European ideal, even as they often continued to conform to rural Ivoirian systems. Urban men hoped to be the ‘breadwinners’ of the family complemented by homebound housewives, but women resisted such attempts to cut off their access to external wages and most families couldn’t afford to limit themselves to a single income.

As the economy collapsed, the middle-class jobs to which Ivoirians aspired disappeared, while the immigrant population continued to fill the menial jobs Ivoirians had always considered fit only for outsiders. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the informal economy grew exponentially, and men increasingly relied on a connection to the criminal network for income (Newell 2006). Most young men made their living largely through the ubiquitous profession of *keneur* (taken from the David Carradine’s character ‘Caine’ in the Kung Fu television series). Further confirming the imbrication of the sex...
and economy, the word ‘ken’ in *nouchi* means both a deal or transaction in the informal economy and to ‘finish’ with a woman. Typically, those at the bottom of the criminal networks were responsible for the most direct forms of crime, picking pockets, snatching bags and necklaces, burglary, mugging, and armed robbery. The goods procured in this way were quickly sent into the wider network, and this was where the *keneurs* took over, seeking to get as much out of their clients as possible and pocket the marginal profits. Other typical forms of income involved forging documents (especially those connected with travel visas), selling stolen or illegally discounted cellphone minutes, guarding cars and running other errands for nightclub clientele, and expropriating stolen valuables from thieves caught in the act by threatening to call a crowd or get police involvement. Many men did take small supplementary jobs like assisting tailors, working in a coffee shop or illegal cellphone stand, or temporary construction work but they tended to hide this from their peers as much as possible, and the income from such work was not enough for them to support the consumption needs of a *bluffeur*. The most successful within this system were those with the best social networks, conduits for both information and wealth that required maintenance through regular exchange and acts of generosity, and expanded upon the basis of reputation or ‘fame’ in Munn’s sense (1986).

Women, on the other hand, remained imbedded with a primary kin network. This was not a unilineal kinship structure with corporate groups; even if urban residents maintain affiliation with such structures in villages where they still exist in some form, within the city kinship was organized in much the same fashion as men’s peer groups. Relatives traced their connections through loose networks that were maintained through informal patterns of exchange and mutual support. Urban marriage had less to do with relationships between lineages or securing rights to children, and was increasingly a kind of luxury, a prestige right proving one’s modernity, financial stability, and ability to free oneself from dependence on kin. As Luc, a 20-year-old studying to be a mechanic, explained: ‘usually you can’t get married even if you want to, because the parents will only let a girl get married to someone who has money, a job and a way to support them both. It is the man who needs to get a house for them to live in too.’ Thus it was a devotion to the letter of Euro-American marriage as the beginning of an independent nuclear family that hindered marriage rather than a rejection of its values. Most men and women instead engaged in polyamorous sexual relations and this was considered normal up at least into one’s thirties. Whether or not
these couples stayed together, any children resulting from the union stayed with the woman’s extended urban kin network, if not the woman herself. Luc continued:

Everyone has children without worrying about it. The woman keeps the children and lives with her parents and the guy sends money to help support them, but they are not connected unless they want to be. Most men also have multiple girlfriends, some have as many as eight. And then when a man dies it gets really complicated to work out the inheritance. Everyone is trying to get their share. But for all those he’s lost interest in or who live far away, forget it, out of luck.

The man may or may not claim paternity, but if he did it was through recurring gifts to the children and family that took care of them. Even inheritance patterns, then, which used to be dominated by more formal kin relations, were now influenced by informal relations expressed through exchange. A child would only be able to claim inheritance from his father if his father had recognized him through unregulated gift exchange during his lifetime. This was the more practiced form of urban kin alliance, and like most network relations, it was informal and voluntary.

Women, as the de facto line of descent in urban Ivoirian society, were more invested in the kin networks that supported their children. Ironically, unlike men, they were not shamed by taking on menial labor, and so were far more likely to have a steady income, even though it was unlikely to bring in large sums at once like the informal economy. They spent more time than men upkeeping distant kin relations, traveling around the city and even to their parents’ villages on a regular basis. This kin network formed their primary source of financial support.

Women had a variety of ‘legitimate’ jobs available to them, working as maids, seamstresses, and in hair salons, all poorly paid jobs. However, petty commerce was probably the most common source of income, running stalls in the market or selling street food, or working as marchands ambulants [walking merchants] selling pagnes, water, fruit or other snack food. Le Pape also described ‘illegal’ women’s commerce, his principal example being the sale of palm wine or bangi (Le Pape 1997). Other examples would be the cellphone stands I mentioned earlier, or koutoukou, homemade liquor, but these activities were ignored by authorities. Much more profit was available to women willing to work in a maquis, where they were paid relatively well and earned occasional tips, free meals and drinks from men attempting to seduce them. Indeed, even female clientele profited by accepting gifts in ex-
change for varying degrees of sexual attention. However, women in *maquis* were also looked down upon as *godraps* by more ‘proper’ women and had more difficulty maintaining long-term relationships with men, because they were constantly under suspicion of cheating and impropriety.

*Godraps* were distinguished from prostitutes by Abidjanese, even though both groups were promiscuous and both expected money in exchange for sex, because the *godrap* chose her relationships and where and when she might have sex, while a prostitute simply sat at her doorstep waiting for passersby (see Cornwall 2002 and Wojcicki 2002 for comparison). A prostitute was a professional, while a *godrap* simply enjoyed nightlife, nice clothes, and having a good time, and used men to pay for these things. According to Chernoff, the *ashawo* (Ghanaian versions of the Ivoirian *godrap*) were disrespected neither for their promiscuity nor for their reliance upon money from sex; their controversy derived from their freedom from familial and patriarchal control (2003:74). *Godraps* were at once scorned by ‘proper’ women (especially married women or daughters in wealthier families) yet appreciated more generally for their wit, free-spirited lifestyle, and their pragmatic, streetwise independence. As Cole writes of Madagascar:

> all girls who engage in the game of sex for money are constantly involved in a politics of reputation. They balance precariously between a basic cultural acceptance of youthful sexuality and a strong sense that after a short period of searching, young women should be married off and in the home. Although the idea of women married and in the home has always been more relevant to middle class than lower class notions of adult femininity, it is an ideal that many urbanites seek to achieve, even if financial circumstances prevent most people from doing so’ (Simplice 2001: 9).

Similarly, women in Abidjan had to balance between the pride of economic success and independent streetwise survival they could get through the sexual economy and their failure to follow normative standards beyond their reach. Furthermore, as in writings by Hunter (2002) and Cornwall (2002), women often needed the income from sexual relationships with men in order to afford the clothes that provide them with the ability to *bluff* in the first place.

A perfect example of the two-sided nature of Ivoirian perspectives on femininity can be found in the advice column printed in *Gbich!*, a weekly humor magazine. The column was called *‘Courrier Drap’* and it always included two responses from the letter it printed, one from a character named ‘Godra’ and the other called ‘Madouce’ [my sweet]. The woman writing in February
2001 explained that she had been having an affair with a married 40-year-old man for four years. She was a university student living on campus, and he had furnished her room with such luxuries as a television, refrigerator, and cookstove. However, when she mentioned her desire to get married he not only broke up with her, but took back everything he had given her without warning. While Madouce accused the girl of being materialistic and told her to leave this married man to his guilt and move on and find a nice unattached man, Godrap had a different perspective:

If he hasn’t already taken the bed, tell him to come and take that too! What does he think this is? You gave him four years good and loyal service and this is how he thanks you? Why can’t they even change a little? My dear, you must threaten him. Wherever he put those things, he has to bring them back as soon as possible or you will go and *djafoule* [make a scene, scream] at his wife’s house. He has cheated on her with you all this time, and he doesn’t even have shame at his age. My dear, he didn’t build you a house. He didn’t buy a car for you. You have him your body, and in exchange, he bought you all these things. He better go bring it back pronto! (Madouce 2001:10).

*Godrap* is a catch-all term covering everything from materialistic party girls to women that had left their families to those that survived through ‘transactional sex’ (Hunter 2002). Paradoxically, while being *godrap* signified a form of financial independence, it ironically also referred to their reliance upon sexual relationships with men.

**The Dangerous Consumption of Women**

*Nouchi* men felt that the most important element of seduction was the image of wealth and success, and indeed, the word *bluffeur* also meant to cruise for women. Luc told me that, ‘To seduce women one must get drunk, so that they will say you have money. That is why people like to sit in *maquis*, it is a way of saying “money.”’ Likewise, *Gbich!* described the character of the *drageur* [playboy]:

Guy Martial Deubozieu [of-the-pretty-eyes] is a contractual employee somewhere. Of middle class, he must manage his salary over the course of the month. Making 50,000 CFA a month [$75], he works his fingers to the bone just to hold on until they pay him. Without *dindin* [slowing down] the man buys himself new clothes and shows up just as quickly in a *maquis* [bar] that he has had his eyes on. Calling the *go* [babe] that interests him to his side, he begins to order [drinks and food], all *pour la faire encaisser* [literally, to cash in on her]. The latter, who believes she
has fallen on the chance of her life, does not hesitate to fall into his arms. She only loses her illusions when she sees him the next day completely broke taking the bus (Simplice 2001:9).

The story of a man using wealth to seduce women is an uncomfortably common one, but the extremes to which some Ivorian men will go, sacrificing a month’s income in a single night, highlights the performative nature of such a construction. That is to say, the image of ‘modern’ success an Ivorian seeks is caught up in a performance of spending, of demonstrating his financial worth, something of which any streetwise Ivorian woman will be well aware he has little. But through his seductive smokescreen, he also produces himself socially, the product of a combination of illusory wealth and real social success.

This seductive image of success was so crucial that men cowered before women’s acquisitive yearnings, fearing their capacity to reveal a fissure in the bluff. Olivier, a friend of Luc’s in his early 20s who made ends meet between work in an illegal cellphone booth and various ‘deals’ on the side, had been planning a date with his girlfriend on the other side of the city for months, carefully saving his money. At the last minute he decided to cancel. Rather than telling her that he really wanted to be there but didn’t have enough money, he told her that an important ken (deal) had come up and he needed to do business. I asked him why he didn’t just tell her the truth, arguing she was probably much more insulted that he was prioritizing a deal over their date than if she knew he just didn’t get his money in time. Looking at me in desperation, he explained:

She would leave me instantly. You don’t know Ivorian women. Maybe there is one in a thousand who is good enough to understand but most of them are only interested in money… In Côte d’Ivoire, you can’t tell a girl you’re poor. She will drop you like that. The moment she knows that you have a money problem she says to herself, ‘no, he’s worthless, he’s not interesting.’ That is why people will always pass money to the guy who is with a girl so that it looks like he is paying for everything.

The antagonism between the sexes is revealed by men’s perceptions of women’s capacity for consumption. Nouchi men represented women as creatures of insatiable appetite, whose only goal in life was to drain men of any income they have, then move on to another, wealthier victim. Sitting in a maquis, I watched one man surreptitiously tell another who was flashing money
ostentatiously ‘Damme tes pierres, bô… les gos va te din’ [Hide your cash, man, the girls will see you]. Here we see the strange ambiguities around display, the desire to show off one’s wealth (often explicitly with the desire to attract women) mixed with the fear that others (especially women) will try to take advantage of your success. Despite all their talk of seduction and bluff, men feel powerless before the consuming demands of women in their life.

Dedy, a man in his 30s, was known as the ‘Village Chief’ for his ability to mediate arguments on the street, a service he collected tips from, which complemented some petty theft and chantage [impersonating police officers to collect bribes]. One day walking on the street we ran into one of his many girlfriends who invited us to her birthday party. In the same breath she asked Dedy for 5000 CFA since Easter was coming and she needed to get her hair done. As we walked away, he scowled:

Solange gives men too much crap. It’s impossible to go to the party now, I’ll have to say that I am sick. She says her hair needs to be done. She needs to go to the village for Easter. And my wife? Her hair isn’t done either. How am I supposed to deal with that? It’s like I walk in there with a pile of money on my head. The girl is used to all the grand types that go to the bar, she thinks I am one of them.

Thus, men needed multiple women to prove their success to other men, but found themselves drained financially by these sexual connections.

Luc told me about a group of women who live on Avenue 19 called the cleos (slang for ‘guzzling straight out of the bottle,’ he says).

They are clear-skinned like that, and they are always together. People say that if you want to go out with one of these women, they send a spy to see if you have pierres [money]. Now, if you do, the woman accepts to go out with you. But they arrange the whole thing between themselves first. So when you arrive at the maquis, at the same moment they all descend on your table. It is as though they have radar. You are obliged to pay for five or six women instead of one, and furthermore, you have to make them dai [drunk], because they like to drink like that. If you really want the girl, you can easily spend 50,000 CFA like that without noticing it. They are dangerous these girls.

Here again we see that men were not alone in yere maneuvers of bluff and con. The cleos were the epitome of the godrap, believed to continually exploit men’s resources even as men hope to fool women into believing they are wealthy and worthy of attention.

These dynamics, whether real or perceived, affected my own role as an...
ethnographer. I often naively invited women from the neighborhood to join our table, or tried to set up appointments to talk to them. I did not realize the ‘danger’ I was in until Dedy became angry with me for giving my phone number to a woman who had invited us to a nightclub. He said:

You have to understand that when a woman talks to you she is thinking primarily of money. When she sees white skin she thinks she has seen Jesus. So when Nicole invited us she was thinking that this would be great because you would be paying for her to get into the club and be buying her drinks. So it’s just exploitation. You have to always pay attention to women here; they are dangerous.

I was told that if I ever allowed a woman to know where I lived ‘it’s all over,’ she would soon be living with me and cooking for me and I would never be able to get rid of her. Apparently I would be the exploited one in such a situation.

But how did women represent their own relationship to wealth and the bluff? Women almost universally denied that they chose men based on material considerations. However, almost everyone continued to say that they knew women like that, the ones that only considered money. More importantly, some women admitted to a kind of peer pressure between friends over the relative worth of the men they dated. Men themselves were a sort of accessory to the female bluff. Giselle went out with Raoul, a returned immigrant from the U.S. at least 20 years her senior and completely broke. His ‘American’ identity made him a prestigious boyfriend for Giselle but she became very upset when he talked about having no money. ‘You must not talk about problems of money in front of people. It’s not good to talk about such things.’ I asked if women preferred that men lie about their wealth, and Giselle proclaimed that she herself preferred the truth, but that some women prefer fantasies. ‘They don’t like to hear about poverty. Women want their friends to think that her boyfriend is rich and powerful. This is a type of bluffing women do. They don’t want their friends to think they would go out with a vaut rien [worthless guy].’ Even though women were typically aware of the ‘real’ state of their dates’ finances, like a public secret, women were invested in the impenetrability of the man’s illusion of wealth, for their reputation hung on male performance as well.

However, women did not simply passively evaluate men’s wealth (or the appearance thereof). Godrap girls did in some cases actively engage in taking what they could from their companions. Treichville is a community in which the ability to deceive others is highly esteemed, and one of the most socially acceptable ways for women to swindle people was to seduce men into giving...
them what they wanted. Caroline, a woman in her twenties who was annoyed with two of my friends for being so insistent on courting her sister, muttered as they walked away that these two were _draous_. She explained that girls use this word to refer to guys they don’t take seriously but whom they get to pay for everything. The linguistic relationship to the word _gaou_ is obvious, and the existence of such a word in criminal slang (which men pretended women didn’t speak) clearly points to women’s active involvement in sex as a form of economic expropriation. A teenage girl from Luc and Olivier’s block once said to him ‘Men think that they’re the ones doing the whole _hohoho_, but why can’t women be in the _mouvement_ [‘the informal economy,’ but here ‘movement’ is clearly evocative in other ways]. You take me; I can take you. You can _mougu_ [fuck], I can _mougu_ you too.’ This statement is at once a comment on the sexual inequality of access to the informal economy on which men built their reputation as well as a comment about the structure of the sexual economy, in which men pretended to be the only agents. Gisele stated in no uncertain terms that in both realms, sometimes men were the ones getting screwed.

The day that Solange invited Dedy and me to her birthday party and demanded money, I asked Dedy about who celebrates birthdays. He told me that only women and children celebrate these:

In any case among adults, you never see guys celebrating their birthday; it’s always girls. For women it is much easier to get money together, I think that is why. First, most women have at least three boyfriends, so she will go around and ask each of them to contribute. Then she is often able to find a godfather or even a godmother. In any case, for girls, it is the facility of finance… So she taps all these sources and pulls together a big party, with a tent, sound system, drinks, everything and everything. Often she doesn’t spend a cent on the party.

This picture appears to correspond well with the collective image of men as the suppliers of cash and women as the consumers. But in practice, men are not necessarily the sugar daddies that everyone pretends. For Dedy continued with a revealing conclusion.

That is why we guys often dream of having a girlfriend, because we feel it is easier to get things accomplished when you have a girl trying for you. We say, ‘that which a woman wants, God wants.’

It was women who had the ‘facility of finance’! Precisely because they were allowed to ask for money from their boyfriends without shame, and could draw on kin resources more easily than men, women could get large sums of
money together quickly. For this reason, despite male claims that ‘women are the greatest beggars of them all’ and ample evidence for women’s demands for money, men often depended on financial aid from women as well. Men’s income was unpredictable and unstable but involved large lump sums interspersed with long droughts, while women tended to have jobs with steady incremental income. Furthermore, because men invested their energy and wealth primarily in non-kin networks, they could not demand very much from their weak kin ties, but intimate relationships with women allowed them a kind of access, a gateway, to those ultimately more reliable kin networks.

The bluff was not only about building and securing intragender peer networks, then, but also about seducing across gender boundaries, thereby securing access to both the men’s trade networks and women’s kinship networks. The bluff was thus also a way of performing, producing, and reproducing kinship itself, or at least the urban form of it. Men seemed to speak of women as draining objects of prestige production; yet they depended upon women for financial stability. Women were feared for their ability to consume, but in reality there were social restrictions on women’s access to arenas of display and public consumption as well as the profitable criminal economy. Women thus used men’s dependence upon them as a central means of access to the space of bluff, prestige goods and the benefits of the informal economy. In this way, women and men mutually constituted each other’s productive social networks, performing their respective Western roles as male producer and female consumer, even as in practice their roles were somewhat reversed.

**Conclusion**

The modernity bluff involves not only the Veblenesque conspicuous consumption of name brand sportswear and other prestige goods, nor simply the potlatch style destruction of wealth around the table of beer, but also the performance of embodied gender identities of the ‘modern Other.’ I suggest that these competitive performances of otherness (what Butler calls ‘cross-identifications’) can be compared to the performances of drag queens (Butler & Martin 1994; Butler 1990). Butler writes that ‘[t]he transvestite, however, can do more than simply express the distinction between sex and gender, but challenges, at least implicitly, the distinction between appearance and reality that structures a good deal of popular thinking about gender identity’ (Butler 1988:527). Drag undermines the distinction between mimesis and the original by demonstrating that the original is already a performance, an illusion: ‘In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure
of gender itself’ (Butler 1990:187). In a passage that inspired Butler’s theory of performative gender, Esther Newton describes drag as a:

double inversion that says ‘appearance is an illusion’. Drag says ‘my ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ is ‘masculine’. At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; ‘my appearance “outside” is masculine but my essence “inside” is “feminine”’ (Newton 1972:130).

Similarly, in the bluff, the Ivoirian appearance indicated a ‘modern’ and wealthy identity, while their ‘inside’ continued to be an impoverished third world resident. At the same time, the opposite: the Nouchi youth’s ‘outside’ was known to be an unemployed urban hoodlum, but he was demonstrating that his cultural ‘inside’ was that of a cosmopolitan man with the knowledge and wherewithal to equal any modern subject. In the economy of the bluff, embodied gender roles and the performance of ‘modern’ identity coalesced into what constituted, for the Nouchi, a symbolic (and real) transformation of the self. The urban Ivoirian actors were reveling in the illocutionary power of the performative, the ability to make real through appearance, if only temporarily, what was otherwise merely the reverie of desire. The bluff was more than simply the expression of the imaginary (Appadurai 1991; Gondola 1999; Weiss 2002; Weiss 2004), but rather the projection of the fantastic onto the realm of the social.

However, Esther Newton herself later critiqued Butler’s work for taking the idea of parodic critique too far. As she wrote in 2000, ‘Drag and camp are not simply anti-essentialist performances that somehow undermine traditional gender dichotomy… Both mundane and theatrical drag and camp are signification practices that cannot be separated from material conditions or from the intentions of actors and audiences who embody and interpret them’ (2000:66). Indeed, she writes, most drag performances ‘build on or reinforce’ ideas of authenticity and essence rather than destabilizing them. Her analysis of lesbian transvestites’ inability to take on the same kind of theatrical power as gay male actors lead to her request for more careful ethnographic analysis of power relations *within* the realm of the performance, rather than between the world of performers and the greater world of which they are a subculture.

This distinction is crucial to understanding in what ways the bluff was at once a sort of conversion to the illusion of modernity offered by the ‘civilizing mission’ narratives of the French and a form of resistance to it. The bluff was not, I would argue, the kind of playful parodic camp described by Sontag (1964), even if it shared features of seduction and duplicity. Certainly
the bluff, in its embrace of heightened theatricality, opened itself to multiple interpretations and play. However, it was not so much placing ironic quotation marks around the real, claiming life is theater, but rather the inverse: for the bluffeur, the theater is life – it is a moment in which they could live as their ‘true’ selves. The bluffeurs were not parodying the colonial as in Bhabha’s notion of mimesis (1994), even if their mimesis did contain a double edge as he suggests. Nor is their performance aimed at the wider world, as Ferguson would suggest in his connection between mimesis and membership, even if the bluff was most certainly a claim to that membership. The double-edged performance of the bluff was more locally directed: it was a claim to modern identity that excluded all those in the audience that cannot equal up to the performance, while simultaneously undermining the semiotics of a political hierarchy that legitimated its class status through consumption of European luxury goods. The mimesis of African-American street style was at once a rejection of local class hierarchy based on elitist consumption of colonial symbols of power and a claim to superior cultural appropriation, since America was understood to be a site of greater contemporary power and modernity than Europe (Newell 2005). Thus the bluff was neither a Fanonian postcolonial loss of authentic identity (1967), nor an eye-winking slight of colonial whiteness, but a critique of local power and a claim to local superiority, utilizing the semiotic force of Otherness.

The point can be illustrated through a comparison with the African-American drag balls of the film Paris is Burning (Livingston 1990). Throughout the film, the background music focuses on the song ‘Got to be Real’ by Cheryl Lynn, and the performers highlight the importance of being ‘real’ or ‘natural’ in their interviews. While the actors are concerned with masking sexuality in a heteronormative public, the categories performed at the ball speak to broader questions of identity, including soldiers, business executives, college students, high-class models, as well as lower-class male and female heterosexual African-Americans. The ability to blend into ‘real’ categories of life – and the knowledge that doing so is always an act – is crucial, but of almost equal importance is the fantasy of social importance, glamour, and wealth, all of which the actors feel they are entitled to. As Pepper LaBeija puts it, ‘I never felt comfortable being poor, I just don’t. Or even middle class doesn’t suit me. Seeing the riches, seeing the way people on Dynasty lived, these huge houses.’ Another performer adds, ‘A ball to us is as close to reality as we are going to get to all that: fame, fortune, and stardom and spotlights.’ A ball, they tell filmmaker Jennie Livingston, is a place where anything you want
to be, you can be. And just as in the bluff, there is a crossover between this ritually produced space of fantasy and everyday life, as some of them dreamed of ‘making it for real’ as models and dancers in the world of ‘actual’ glamour. Here it becomes quite clear that Esther Newton’s request for attention to the ethnographic complexity of local performance and Butler’s approach to the semiotic challenge performance raises for discourses of authenticity are not incompatible. For I agree that the drag queens at these balls are not actively trying to take down the hierarchies of class, race, or sexuality in their competitions (they are trying above all to bring down their competitors and gain status within local networks), and yet, their boldfaced presentation of their ability to live – even if momentarily – like people in Dynasty does challenge the basis of ‘distinction’ through which class legitimates its hierarchy.

I suggest, then, that urban sexual antagonism in Côte d’Ivoire and beyond ought to be understood not simply in terms of domestic economic struggles, but also in terms of performative consumption, through which both men and women attempt to produce success through the creation of its illusion, and in the process make use of transnational gender roles they believe to embody modernity. Male and female genders were played to be read by their audience as Westernized, and since the bluff was a kind of seduction, desire itself was structured by the imagination of the ‘Modern Other.’ Through the performance of modernity, actors both seduced their lovers, secured their social networks, and challenged the symbolic (pseudocolonial) capital of the political elite. In the act of the bluff, the extravagant spending of money on the act of seduction was a kind of conversion from one sphere of exchange to another, producing social and sexual relations that were far more important to survival in the contemporary economic structure. Thus, as in the performance at a drag ball, the real and the imagined, the original and its imitation, the embodied and the superficial merged into indistinguishable social experience. For all intensive social purposes, the bluffeur was wealthy, successful, and symbolically ‘modern’; and yet, he was poor and powerless in the face of numerous symbolic and economic obligations from his network, lovers, and kin. In the urban Ivoirian imagination of modernity, women were consumers and men were providers, and for both sexes, the bluff became a dance of exploitation, in which seduction was money and money was sex, and the performance of gender produced social networks for urban survival.

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