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Uses and Pleasures: Sexual Modernity, HIV/AIDS, and Confessional Technologies in a West African Metropolis

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In the wake of the AIDS epidemic, a new version of the "facts of life" has traveled across the globe, disseminated by mass-media campaigns, street theater, and a plethora of awareness-raising techniques. The role of the CD4 lymphocyte, the dangers of unprotected sex, and the viral etiology of this terrible new disease are some of the scientific facts that have been stabilized by an ever-broader network of actors that, as Stacy Pigg points out in this volume, is global in scope. Like others in this volume, I will examine here how the practices that diffuse these "new facts of life" work to constitute new moral objects of sex by focusing on the "forms of life" that spring up on the margins of this global biomedical assemblage.

The terrain for this investigation is the evolving sexual modernity of Francophone West Africa's most important metropolis, the coastal city of Abidjan in the nation of Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast). As a major crossroads of trade and migration since it was established as the French West African hub for a colonial export economy, Abidjan grew into a self-consciously high-modernist metropolis under the stewardship of its first postcolonial president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny. Buoyed by high export prices for coffee and cocoa, the country's major exports, the city's lights glowed brightly in the 1960s and 1970s, attracting migrants from all over West Africa. As a result its population swelled to over two million and a modernist, multiethnic urban culture was created. Social and geographic mobility, exposure to

"Western ways," and the economic empowerment of women provided a fertile ground for new gender roles, a phenomenon that received widespread media attention.

When in the mid to late 1970s export commodity prices collapsed in the wake of the petroleum crisis, the Ivoirian economy fell like a house of cards and everyday life and its popular culture—songs, tabloid commentary, and comic novels—were rife with the modernist tropes of liberated women, anxious men, and dangerous mistresses (Vidal 1979). Consonant with the theses of Michel Foucault (1990, 1984), a discourse of sexuality emerged and iterated concerns about how in the rapidly evolving and modernizing social landscape of Abidjan, an individual was to orient itself to the prevailing moral order in and through sex. This discursive apparatus laid the groundwork for the emergence of a gendered public sphere and allowed sexuality to emerge as an ethical project, making sex available for individual forms of self-fashioning. It was against this landscape of sexual modernity, and after the HIV epidemic had become a major public health problem in the city (De Cock 1989), that issues of sexual behavior became linked to those of sexual identity.

Spurred by funding from development organizations and other international donors with AIDS prevention on their agenda, in 1994 local community groups began to proliferate. Drawing on health education approaches honed in AIDS prevention campaigns in the West, these community groups were vehicles for disseminating AIDS prevention messages that encoded normative, biologized notions of sexuality. These public health messages also worked to further differentiate the sexual public of Abidjan's cultural modernism, showing how local and transnational NGOs functioned as sites of translation.[1] In this essay I will show how the social technologies imported by international NGOs to prevent HIV/AIDS furnished an opportunity for Abidjan's homosocial communities to redefine themselves in light of the "new facts of life."

Transnational and transcultural negotiations were used by Abidjan men and youths to adapt social practices imported by NGOs working with AIDS issues to local circumstances, thus helping to reshape the cultural geography of same-sex relations. These practices advocated sexual openness such as frank depictions of sexual activity in order to foster the adoption of safer sexual practices such as condom use during penetration. They also sought to "give a face" to the epidemic by using confessional technologies (techniques deployed in workshops such as role playing, using open-ended questions, and so on) to encourage Africans diagnosed with HIV to "come out" about

their illness and testify. Together, these practices worked to link dissident performances of gender to notions of sexual orientation.

My argument here is that while the "new facts of life" disseminated by AIDS and the response of development agencies may have constituted a moral object of sex, their importance lies more in the effects of the social technologies used to disseminate them. These discursive practices located sexuality within a tactical domain, thus making it available as both substance and objective of the strategies by which individuals sought to position themselves pragmatically within an unraveling postcolonial political economy. The ethical dimension of this process is to be found most clearly in how sexuality became a tactic for self-fashioning.

I will present this argument in three parts. First, there is evidence of a homosocial culture that flourished in the early postcolonial years in Abidjan—the years of the postcolonial economic boom (the Ivoirian "miracle") that preceded the economic crisis of the 1980s. This flourishing culture testifies to the draw exercised by the city's reputation for sexual liberalism and affords a glimpse into how, in the flush of postcolonial modernisms, sexual relations extended beyond questions of reproduction to include forms of self-fashioning produced through performances of gender. In other words, I argue here that this "sexual liberalism" made an almost experimental "playing" of gender roles available as a strategy for fashioning selves.

Second, within the city's heterogeneous social landscape, narratives about individuals make up a "social repertoire" that allows social relations to be negotiated even where kinship networks are weak sources of intelligence or are simply unreliable. Circulating as rumors in the contemporary homosocial community, these narratives allowed the dissemination of sexual imaginaries as well as knowledge about them. With the global economic crisis of the 1970s that ushered in the "crisis years" of the 1980s, awareness of social inequality was heightened even as poverty deepened; as a result, social mobility became a more important basis for negotiating sexual relations and identities. Certainly, social mobility offered the potential for increased material and emotional security, but it also expanded opportunities for new experiences and pleasures. Consequently, this repertoire of narratives took on particular material significance, inserting sex into a variety of discursive practices and, in the process, making it available as a tool for self-fashioning.

Third, in the early 1990s, growing awareness of the seriousness of the AIDS epidemic instigated a response on behalf of international donor institutions that championed "breaking the silence" around sex, as well as the "self-help" and "empowerment" of people living with HIV and AIDS. As NGOS

made available an array of social technologies and norms, initially through pedagogical approaches to sexuality and sexual education, these fostered a culture of openness and disclosure around intimate issues. Subsequently the desire to encourage people with HIV to "break the silence" and speak out about their illness created a demand for "testimonials" and the confessional practices for eliciting them. As a result, these confessional technologies conjugated with the narratives and the material effects they produced of existing social networks, and were tactically taken up by individuals to fashion themselves and address a broad range of material needs and desires. Thus AIDS prevention efforts, and the NGO mchanisms through which they were disseminated, allowed homosexual men to organize a quasi public space legitimated by a culture of sexual openness within which "gayness"—in this case, one of many possible narratives of sexual identity—could be cautiously affirmed.

Boubar, Oscar, and the Emergence of the "Milieu"

Abidjan's homosocial scene has, at least since the 1970s, been known as the "milieu."[2] Its history is most often remembered through the story of two nightclubs and of their owners and their patrons. No one recalls exactly how the rivalry between Oscar's and Boubar's establishments developed; but everyone does remember that it developed during the 1970s. For most, the milieu was a question of style. Boubar's was "conservative" and "old school." Boubar's "boys"—an assortment of handsome young men who may or may not have been his lovers—might have always been smartly dressed, *sapé* perhaps,[3] but they were certainly not innovative. Boubar's social circle revolved around his restaurant, laconically known as Boubar's, which served every day for lunch the national dish from his native Senegal, *tiep bo djen* (fish cooked with rice, yams, squash, eggplant, and sweet potato). At night, Boubar's was turned into a disco frequented by men and women from the milieu and also *entraineuses* (women hired by the bar to entice men into the establishment), their patrons, and a diverse cross-section of neighborhood characters.

Oscar, on the other hand, was "trendy." His crowd was considered "hip," relatively outrageous, and prone to hysterics, scandal, and drama. Oscar, unlike Boubar, eventually became somewhat famous because stories about him appeared in the local and international press. He came to Abidjan from Mali in 1969, after failing his baccalaureat exams. Once in Abidjan he developed a network of connections through his job as a hairdresser at the famous La Coupe hair salon in the Plateau district. Oscar's French *patronne* intro-

duced Oscar to her coterie, a mixed group of European socialites and bored housewives who frequented the salon and gossiped while having their hair done. Oscar was a natural confidante.

At a Mardi Gras party in 1978, at the suggestion of one of his clients from the salon, Oscar rounded up some friends and put on a drag show. He and his group were an instant success. The impromptu drag show quickly became a troupe and played to packed and appreciative audiences at private soirées, even in the interior of the country. Within a year, Oscar had found a home for his *copines*—girlfriends—on the rue Pierre et Marie Curie in the nightclub district of zone 4, where he set up a cabaret. The show featured his copines under a string of modernist pseudonyms: Zaza Intercontinentale, Estella Boeing 747, Mercedez Benz 281. Initially frequented by mainly European patrons, Chez Oscar's African clientele grew and soon became a rival to Boubar's as the milieu. The show at Oscar's featured brilliant impersonations of all the "sophisticated ladies" of African cultural life, including the traditional Baoulé singer Allah Thérèse (a favorite of Houphouët), Josephine Baker ("Mon Pays Haïti"), and Miriam Makeba ("Pata-pata") as well as American disco divas Diana Ross and Grace Jones ("La Vie en Rose" and "My Jamaican Guy"). The crowd favorite was, predictably, Oscar's rendering of the queen of Afro-zouk, Ivoirian singer Aïcha Koné ("Africa Liberté").

Oscar's story was the subject of reports in the widely read Paris daily *Libération* in 1983. *Libération*'s front-page story followed on the heels of a feature in *Ivoire-Dimanche* (popularly referred to as *I-D*), the Abidjan weekly that was avidly read for its occasionally provocative—given the assumed prudishness of the literate public—coverage of social life in the capital. The story on Oscar and his troupe was remarkable in that it did not gloss over the homosexuality of Oscar, Zaza, and the others: "To assert that Oscar and his troupe are homosexuals is a line that most Abidjanais would not cross. Startled by the appearance and behaviour of these young boys, certain would swear—often without the least proof—that we are dealing with a band of sexual inverts. We leave each side to its own truth, in order to remind the reader what is certain: we are here in the realm of art" (Mandel 1983). The story was widely read and well received: in an interview following the *Libération* story, Oscar says that his African clientèle grew after the article was published.

That the story passed with little controversy is surprising and attests to a certain "liberalization" at the time of the discursive climate around sexuality. Nine years earlier, in 1974, *I-D* published an interview with a self-avowed lesbian that caused a small scandal. In the interview the young woman

explained how she became a lesbian, including rather frank details of her amorous life. The story outraged *I-D's* readers and brought a severe rebuke from the political bureau of Houphouët's ruling party (the PDCI, Côte-d'Ivoire's single party at the time) and an apology from *I-D's* editor. Perhaps *I-D's* Oscar story, by being couched as a theater review, passed scrutiny more easily, or perhaps frank depictions of lesbianism exacerbated male anxieties about the postcolonial economic order. When I interviewed the now-current editor of a major Abidjan daily who was a writer for *I-D* at the time, he attributed the different reception accorded the two stories by noting that "mentalities had evolved" in the nine years that separated them, largely because stories dealing with sexuality had become more commonplace—the inevitable result of the liberalizing effect of the international media.

Some remember the late 1970s and early 1980s as the heyday of the milieu. Oscar's cabaret did not fare well with the deepening economic crisis, and he moved to Libreville in Gabon in the late 1980s. Many visible members of the milieu dropped out of sight. Boubar's restaurant still exists but no longer turns into a nightclub. Indeed, at one point in the late 1980s he got married, had the first of many children, and went on the hadj pilgrimage. He died two years ago. Oscar's cabaret is no more, and though Boubar's restaurant is now run by his wife it is only open for lunch.

When Oscar was interviewed by *Libération* in 1983 he dismissively referred to the common perception throughout Africa that homosexuality was a colonial importation: "It's true that in colonial times it was widespread, but it existed before. You only have to go to the village, it still exists . . . In traditional societies homosexuality is practiced but we don't talk about it!" The ethnographic literature on homosexuality in Africa is equally laconic. E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1970) devoted a study to "sexual inversion" among the Zande and South African historian Patrick Harries (1990) notes that homosexuality among miners scandalized missionaries in the early twentieth century. Michel Leiris (1996), the pioneering French surrealist and ethnographic writer, makes a fleeting reference to African "pederasts" dancing cheek to cheek in a Dakar nightclub in 1929 at the outset of his journal detailing the Dakar-Djibouti expedition. These accounts are, however, silent about whatever homosexual exchanges Europeans may have been engaged in. Oscar came originally from Mali, and a number of other informants have confirmed that, to those who found gender roles in the village (or even in other cities) too restrictive, Abidjan's cosmopolitanism was enticing. What was at stake in those early years was not so much being able to have sex with other men—that was always possible in less urban settings, where

sexual license depended more on one's social position than one's gender—but rather being able to play with gender outside of sanctioned roles. For these African moderns, what was at stake in "sex" was performance rather than bodily pleasures or fundamental truths about the self.

The Contemporary Social Geography of Homosocial Relations

Speaking almost twenty years later, my informants reiterated Oscar's perception of Abidjan as a sexual cosmopolis. Curiously enough, those who assert that homosexuality is a purely European colonial import to Africa agree with "queer theorists" (e.g., Sedgewick 1990; Lane 1995) who have argued that homosociality is deeply encoded into Western cultural forms. What is at stake in these arguments, ultimately, is the manner in which masculinity is constructed through culture and, I would argue, social and economic relations. After the economic crisis of the 1980s that turned the Ivoirian "miracle" into a mirage and drove an ever-growing proportion of the population into a spiral of poverty, the role of socioeconomic relations in shaping the trajectories through which sexuality is enacted has become more salient than the modernist quest for self-expression depicted in Oscar's narratives.

"Economic bisexuals" are the emblematic figure of the impact of the economic crisis on the homosocial milieu. I first heard the term used by a young gay man from a wealthy family, Oumar, in reference to one of his lovers, Karim. Karim told me that eventually he would like to marry an African woman with a good education but who was also "house broken"—that is, who would make a good wife and mother, yet his economic circumstances precluded such a move. He had a girlfriend, but at the time preferred seeing men because "with women it's too much of a problem," meaning, he explained, the demands that had to be met. "You have to take women out," he explained, "you have to take care of them, and when you don't, there's always problems." With men it was different, "they take care of you . . . even if they don't give you money, they will buy you a pair of jeans or take you out to dinner."

Born and raised in Abidjan, the child of a large family that lives in one of the modernist apartment blocks in one of the livelier older quarters of the city, Karim explained to me that he was "introduced to the milieu" by a neighbor, whose cross-dressing was the source of local gossip by neighborhood youths. Many neighborhood boys like to go to "Suzanne's" because there was often food and drink there and Suzanne was an almost maternal figure. Although Suzanne has since gone to live in Europe, she is still remembered fondly.

Karim's social circumstances certainly played a role in shaping his sexual trajectory. Although he had obtained the baccalaureat, there were no jobs for "little people" like him who did not have the connections to land a position in the government or in a private firm. Without a job he could not hope to raise a family. Oumar's family was wealthy and, as a result, promised access to the fabled world of the rich, the fact of which Karim must have been aware. Karim's social network was not limited to the milieu because he maintained an active role in a local political group. Should his party win power in upcoming elections, he might be able to get a patronage job through that connection. But it was through the milieu that Karim was introduced to Oumar, which was his first break at getting himself "settled" and in a position to marry and raise children.

The term *yossi* is used by those in the milieu to refer to a masculine man who entertains romantic relationships with both men and women. Significantly, however, the term has a less materialistic connotation than does Oumar's qualification of these bisexuals as "economic" because it does not necessarily impute purely economic motives to relationships between men. Karim's story is typical of how the manner in which many yossis, "economic bisexuals," or "ambiguous" types perceive their entry into the milieu in terms of the potential for acquiring a wealthy benefactor—presumably European but not necessarily so. The desire for a "sugar daddy" is certainly stoked by the neighbourhood *folles* (queens) who skillfully leverage local youths' perceptions of their fabulous networks of wealth and prestige in order to obtain sexual favors. Thus, the term yossi does not so much refer to a sexual proclivity as to versatility in sexual object choice and dexterity when it comes to sexual relations. It also indexes the performative dimension of gender referred to by Oscar when he described the attractions of Abidjan's homosocial scene earlier on in the postcolonial era: yossis act like "real" men and that is what matters.

In contemporary Abidjan, however, this performative dimension is embedded in material circumstances of social relations and the tactics used to navigate them for individual and collective benefit. As Oumar once patiently explained to me, local boys *passent à la casserole* (get broken in) before they ever get introduced to anyone important. Sampling by sexual brokers is of course an important business strategy for brokers because the quality of the networks they entertain—the economic returns that can be expected from them—depends in part on the desirability and performance of the youth they can marshal for introductions. However, sampling can also serve as an apprenticeship. Entry in the milieu also involves frank sexual talk, as well as

becoming conversant with a specialized subdialect of *nouchi* that is impenetrable to those outside the milieu. The local folle's acerbic tongue and perceptive reprimands teach the language of dress style and body language. Rumors and gossip—about what is whose "type," what "look" is in with whom, and sexual preferences—impart detailed knowledge of "taste." This knowledge translates into symbolic capital as youth learn how to dress, talk, and act in order to be attractive to "sugar daddies." Oumar's dismissal of bisexuality as "economic," rational, and calculating was, I found, often inaccurate. For many youth, the acquisition of style was desired in terms of being "fashionable" or the pleasure of belonging to a secret community rather than being part of a conscious strategy for "getting" men. Homosexual relations could not be reduced to economic strategy, nor were they simply about experimenting with gender roles. Rather, as forms of self-fashioning they incorporated concerns that were simultaneously those of material and emotional satisfaction, pleasure and desire.

Talking Names around Town: Social Epistemology and Rumouring Networks

Much of the social knowledge of the milieu comes from the stories people tell about other people: stories that I realized were as much about conveying information as positioning the teller, the listener, and the subject of the story in a broader commentary on social relations. Sex is embedded in a discursive ecology (again, why economy?) that conditions with material consequences the tactics called on by individuals. The incidents I describe below that surrounded the circulation of a European film show how the performative dimension of gender is never just about play and fantasy but, in this context, engages particular economies of desire and the material tactics they inform.

Men of Africa was the talk of the milieu in 2000. This pornographic video had been made earlier that year by French producers who were drawn to Abidjan by the city's reputation for sexual liberalism and by the assumption that actors could be easily and cheaply found there. Once in Abidjan, the producers used the milieu to find a cast of characters who were only too willing to figure in the video once they had been told of the pay (I was quoted fees ranging from $100 to $500 depending on who my informants were) and had been promised that the video would never circulate in Abidjan. Of course, once produced the video did find its way back to Africa: a young man named Dje-dje procured a copy on one of his trips to Paris and brought it back as a trophy. The video stimulated vivid interest, not least because the

characters were locals and Abidjan viewers thought they might recognize someone they knew.

I heard countless stories about what happened once the video was "out." I never got to see the video because Dje-dje was very coy and never told me that he had a copy—perhaps he thought I would disapprove. Connoisseurs told me the video was cheesy and "nothing special," but much commentary was offered on the sexual performances and anatomical attributes of the characters. The local circulation of the video did have material consequences, however. One of the characters, I was told, attempted suicide with an overdose of sleeping tablets because he felt that his manhood had been compromised by the video and because his family found out about it. The leading character in the video was quickly nicknamed "la Star." He already had a local reputation as rough trade and sure trouble, but he nonetheless became a hot property that was eagerly sought out for sex by members of the milieu.

Dje-dje, brandishing his video, was first in line, but his tryst with Star turned into a disaster. Star beat him up and was caught with Dje-dje's expensive watch by Dje-dje's then-boyfriend, Théophile, who was returning to the apartment with his three-year-old daughter in tow. Théophile confronted Star in the living room, appealing to him "as a brother" to give back the watch. Star was impervious to reason, however, and left with the watch. Thankfully, the scene with Théophile in the living room was not violent and no one else was hurt. Dje-dje suffered some bruises and a wounded ego (he never told me about the story, and I never asked). Word about the incident quickly got around town, but it didn't seem to diminish Star's desirability: if anything, it enhanced it.

After the story about Dje-dje another story circulated about how Star accepted a proposition from a man named Joseph. After undressing, Star demanded the man give him his mobile phone—a demand that was considered presumptuous because nothing sexual had yet happened. The confrontation once again turned violent, and in the ensuing scuffle Joseph suffered a broken wrist, Joseph's boyfriend received black eye, and Star left with the phone. The bandaged wrist and blackened eye were much commented on afterward. Star subsequently took up with Bruno, a Congolese medical student. This relationship lasted for some months, with Bruno squandering on Star the allowance he got from his parents in Kinshasa for his medical studies. Bruno later failed his qualifying exams, Star disappeared from circulation, and Bruno's reputation suffered as a result.

Indeed, Bruno's name was "spoiled" by what was considered his frivolous behavior. After a while, I found out that during the time he was "keeping"

Star, Bruno was ostensibly "going out" with a wealthier man who had been supporting him, although this man was already himself involved with another young man. One informant laughingly explained to me that it was likely that it was this first protégé who "spoiled" Bruno's name: "Well, you know, it's like when you have two wives, the first wife checks on the second wife 'cause if the second wife's name gets talked around town then it's the first wife who's gonna get grief." Star eventually ended up in prison, although he was released after the 1999 coup when, during an attempt by soldiers to liberate political prisoners held at the Abidjan jail, in the ensuing chaos all six thousand inmates escaped.

In their dizzying array of serial and parallel relationships, these stories—and countless others I collected—depict the random motion of urban life. By espousing homosexuality as an identity and as the pursuit of desire, young men such as Dje-dje released themselves from the social moorings that usually anchor sexual networks. Most Abidjanis look with suspicion on strangers and insist on knowing "who is who" before getting involved. Knowing "who" someone is requires, above all, knowing their family. Because discussions of same-sex desire are not transmitted easily along kinship networks (talk of such things with family can lead to being associated with the milieu) rumoring circulates, in the form of stories, valuable information. Similar to the system of e-mail, stories accumulate and are often broadcast or redirected, giving rise to a plethora of potential misinterpretations that must be navigated carefully by scrutinizing them for their true intent, because at stake is knowing who is who in this social epistemology.

Knowing who is who is also crucial to participating in the informal economy—it allows one to know whom to extend credit to and who can be convinced to buy what. In the city, where poverty makes everyday life precarious, knowing who is who is the key to survival, and as such requires that opinions, gossip, and rumors be collected and weighed against the credibility of the source. Within this set of discursive options, the gender performativity showcased by *Men in Africa* could be inscribed as an economy of desire, transforming sexual performances into material tactics.

Imagining African Masculinities

Rumoring disseminates sexual imaginaries and, when these are conjugated with the inequalities of Abidjan's postcolonial economy, make sex into a powerful technology of the self. I followed one rumor through, a story that concerned a Swiss man who lived in a mansion in Cocody, the wealthy

neighborhood across the lagoon from the Plateau. Accompanied by the friends who brought me there I was able to visit his house, and I was surprised to find that the stories had not exaggerated its opulence. From the palm-shaded garden, marble steps led up in to a vast living room, the entrance flanked by two enormous Bambara statues.

The stories about life in the mansion were largely concerned with the nine young men that at one point or another lived there with the Swiss man. The young men all bear a striking resemblance to each other, occasionally leading outsiders to assume they are all brothers. Their dress expresses a certain *loubard* look: baseball caps, jeans, gold chains, and construction boots. The resemblance is not, in fact, familial. Rather, it is a reflection of the Swiss man's adherence to his "type" in his choice of partner. As a result, the expression "potential Swiss" was occasionally used to describe the look of a new face in the milieu. The awareness of the "Swiss type" stems in large part from stories that are told about the benefits of "Swiss patronage."

Although some of the "Swiss boys" no longer live in the mansion, they all retain a bedroom on the ground floor. One of my informants, Kouadio, left after the Swiss man paid for his studies and set up a small electronics business that gave him an independent income that was enough to marry. Kouadio still returns for regular visits. The contrast between the similarity of the "look" and the difference in character and aspirations belies the structuring power of, in this case, "Swiss" imaginings of African masculinity.

The patronage of the Swiss man is rumored to be generous—private schooling that is paid for (and often squandered), decadent group trips to the Middle East, and even cars. Many stories focus on one of the young men, Yaya, who is said to have masterminded an armed robbery. The victim of the robbery was the Swiss man himself, who was dispossessed of his Mercedes and a significant amount of cash. However, although Yaya was later arrested at a police roadblock driving the car, his patron came and bailed him out of jail. A few years later, Yaya took the Mercedes while drunk, packed it with friends, and had a severe road accident in which several were killed. The Swiss man then had to fly back from Zurich to pay the hospital bills. This story was told to me by Kouadio, who after the accident had to front the money so that the hospital would agree to treat the injured. The mercenary "what's in it for me" attitude displayed by the older boys, of which Yaya was one, was in striking contrast to the vulnerability of the younger boys. How much of this difference, I wondered, could be attributed to their long "Swiss" apprenticeship?

The "tastes" of wealthier men—and the constructions of African mas-

culinity that underlie them—are disseminated as gossip through the milieu, which in turn shapes the way young men present themselves and construct their own masculinity. The projections of masculinity that disenfranchised youths appropriate and reflect back in a quest for economic and emotional resources are not limited to culturally encoded manifestations of desire on the part of wealthier men. For others such as Kouadio, who despite marrying continued to travel the far reaches of the townships in search of young men, sex was also about placing one's identity as an African man attracted to other African men, a complex equation of desire not easily reduced to active/passive or masculine/feminine stereotypes. Kouadio, absorbed by his own issues of identity, and the Swiss man, who was shielded by wealth, were unaware of the power rumoring networks had to project their own desires and make their fantasies come true.

Karim's story, described earlier, of his "recruitment" into the milieu identifies the role of drag queens in signaling the existence of minority sexualities in Abidjan's pullulating townships. However, as the stories of Karim and the Swiss acolytes indicate, what is at stake for these youths is a complex concatenation of material, emotional, and sexual concerns rather than a straightforward quest to subvert the "traditional" gender roles that Oscar and others who migrated to Abidjan in the 1970s found so confining. Within the broader environment of rumor and gossip, young men such as Karim are able to make use of the stories that occur within an economy of discursive practices that produce knowledge about individuals.

These stories show how rumors transmit along, and solidify, social networks, as well as being effective strategies for disseminating information important for survival. These networks are material in that they can be mobilized for economic survival in the city and also that they are concrete, "mappable" trajectories and constitute a social epistemology, which refers to the ways of knowing and navigating social worlds that take hold in this labile urban environment. It is the stuff of what Hebdige (1981) has called "subcultures," stuff whose materiality can be observed in the way that subjects fashion themselves, present themselves to others, and trace particular trajectories in an uncertain world.

Nodes and Networks: Nongovernmental Organizations and AIDS

When Abidjan emerged as the epicenter of the West African HIV epidemic in the late 1980s, its (not unrelated) economic importance and "modernity" made it a logical place for international organizations to pioneer fund-

ing local community groups to implement grassroots AIDS prevention programs. While most of these community groups were young, having been created in response to the drive of large international funding organizations to strengthen "civil society" throughout developing countries in the 1990s, in many respects their genealogy can be traced to colonial voluntary associations. According to the anthropologists who studied the urban realities of colonial modernity, these voluntary associations were a form of "urban kinship" bricolage of "traditional" kinship relations, moral economies, and "modern" forms of social organization.

It is in the space cleared by some of these postcolonial voluntary associations that a quasi-public homosocial sphere is to be found. A few, like the Association des Travesties de Côte-d'Ivoire (ATCI), are legally incorporated and make no bones about their sexual affinities. Others are informal associations of friends and acquaintances who will occasionally organize evening get-togethers or dances, collecting money to rent a dance hall or for purchasing food that they will cook together. In between are organizations and associations whose raison-d'être is unrelated to the issue of sexual orientation, but that have nonetheless become informal meeting places for exchanging stories and knowledge about the city's differentiated sexual terrain. Such organizations include sports clubs, religious groups, and political associations; for example, an impromptu gym in Abobo township, a Buddhist worship club, or the neighborhood youth wing of one of the major political parties. These are not meeting places in the sense of "cruising grounds" where people meet for sex. Rather, they are spaces of complicity where issues of sexuality—including homosexuality—are discussed. They are also informal sites of self-help, where a shared interest like politics, body building, or worship allows the development of solidarity. In these spaces, the discourse of homosexuality is not one about sexual desire. Rather, it emerges as a strategy within a broader calculus of pleasure that conjures material, emotional, and physical pleasures.

While these associations forged urban kinship relations and informal friendship circles, they also acted as nodes within diverse social networks, allowing practices imported by "foreign" agencies to be taken up and disseminated, their objectives and products refashioned according to local agendas. The association Positive Nation is one example of a group whose purpose is ostensibly unrelated to homosexuality, but where the diffusion of practices meant to foster sexual openness and "empower" people with HIV/AIDS led it to develop as a quasi homosocial sphere where sexuality became linked to identity rather than social mobility.

Positive Nation first came to my attention in 1995 when I came across their colorful and slickly produced AIDS prevention pamphlets. The pamphlet contained cartoon figures to illustrate condom use, some of which showed two men while others showed a man and a woman. The sexual explicitness of the educational materials mirrored those of French AIDS organizations. Curious about the source of the educational materials, I became acquainted with the organization and its members. The organization, I learned, was founded in 1993 by two young men, Christophe and Kouamé, who had briefly been lovers before becoming friends. At the time, few people were interested in HIV/AIDS, believing that it was "a disease of poor people, drug addicts, and Western homosexuals." Further, it was felt that it was the responsibility of the state to deal with such public health matters, and the state itself did not seem to think that AIDS was a problem. However, Chistophe and Kouamé, who had lost friends to AIDS, wanted to combat these views.

As I gradually learned more about the organization's two young founders, it became clear to me that Positive Nation represented an attempt to organize a homosocial space that was not just about getting sex. That, Christophe explained to me, was easy enough—in large part due to the difficult economic circumstances the local youths found themselves in. As a result, he explained, there is no shortage of what he called "economic bisexuals," the attractive, masculine young men who look to relationships with other men as a strategy for survival. While these men are referred to using the term described earlier as yossi, their lovers are *woubis*.[4]

Although Christophe would not be called a *woubi—"il n'est pas folle!"* (Christophe is no queen) one of his boyfriends once growled at me when I asked—he lived out his homosexuality through a woubi-centered network. Woubis are popular figures in the neighborhoods where they live: their houses are open to local youths who can count on having meals there when there is not enough at home and occasionally might even be treated to a beer at the local *maquis*. Woubis had money because they had jobs, which they had gotten like everyone else in Abidjan, through contacts. As a result, many neighborhood youths seek out their patronage, much in the same way described earlier when Karim sought out a relationship with Suzanne. These young men have little in the way of economic resources because they come from large families where they are increasingly marginalized when they are unable to contribute financially to the household. "Hanging out" with woubis promises access to wealthier homosexual men.

Such access is not granted easily, however. Christophe told me that these

neighborhood youths had to demonstrate that they could be trusted not to "steal at the first opportunity" and could be counted on to perform errands. The visibility of woubis as presumed homosexuals ensured that the youths who courted them were not homophobic and presumably homophilic. Some of the youths were sexually curious, and when sex was consummated they graduated to the category of yossi. Some woubis functioned as informal dating services, introducing attractive yossis to shyer men who were uncomfortable in public.

After a few years, when he reached his mid-twenties, Christophe tired of socializing with woubis. He had never been interested in them sexually and their antics and "carryings-on" tired him. "They're all drama queens" he told me, adding that he had realized that their "introductions" were less than disinterested. Indeed, he was expected to return the favor in the form of reciprocal introductions to an imagined circle of wealthy, preferably European, men who would shower the youths with gifts, a portion of which would return to the woubi who had originally set up the introductions. He added that he was tired of being used as a "stepping stone" and of being "constantly hit up for loans by little queens who don't know how to manage their money."

Of course, the woubi network was not the only way to meet men. Christophe could always make propositions in the random contacts of everyday life: butcher boys at the market, car washers, peddlers, shopkeepers. However, perhaps because these men hadn't been checked out beforehand by a neighborhood woubi, or perhaps because Christophe just "didn't know how to pick them," these encounters often turned into disasters. After a few such disasters, he would turn to more reliable sources—making use of the "social epistemology" of the milieu—before returning to more spontaneous, and more sexually exciting, strategies.

For Christophe, the founding of Positive Nation allowed his engagement with the milieu to gradually broaden beyond meeting men for sex. The organization was modeled on a French AIDS activist group that had taken highly visible actions in France, and had itself been inspired by an earlier American gay and AIDS activist group. Once the group was founded, its rhetoric of openness around sexuality as a strategy for combating AIDS easily attracted funding—from international agencies that found its culture of sexual openness "refreshing" and "adapted" to the needs of AIDS prevention work—as well as a broad cross-section of recruits.

Kouamé's charisma played an important role in drawing other men, although of undetermined sexuality, to the organization. The first time I interviewed Kouamé in 1996, he had come home from work for lunch and was

on the balcony of an apartment he shared with friends, busily peeling potatoes in the sweltering heat for a quick meal of *steak frites*. Unlike Christophe, Kouamé is brimmingly self-confident, a handsome man whose burly frame, "in-charge" demeanor, and air of financial ease earns him the respect that is accorded to "big men" in his neighborhood. In the neighborhood, he is described as *en forme* (in shape) or simply *le gros* (the big one). Kouamé "knew" he was attracted to men ever since he was a child growing up in a poor neighborhood of Abidjan. His first relationship, at age fifteen, was with a French man he met in a park. The man brought him home and eventually took him in, paying for his education and then sending him to university in France in 1992, seven years after they first met. Their sexual relationship was extremely brief—Kouamé refers to his man, who has since died, as his "tutor." Kouamé loved his stay in France, a country where "the government respects people," but he returned to Abidjan to be "home" after he finished his studies.

Kouamé then moved in with a Dutch man he met on his return from France in 1994, and took a job in a Lebanese-run import-export firm. At this point, at age twenty-five, he told his family he was homosexual, which was greeted with general indifference. His sisters, who "adore" him, only adored him more, and two of his brothers, who never liked him anyway, decided they liked him less for it. His parents ascribed his announcement to his European stay and decided to wait for the phase to pass and for him to marry and have children. Kouamé often showed up at the family compound with various boyfriends in tow; they were always well received, and treated like family friends.

Kouamé is the youngest son of a large matrilineal family. His parents and three of his sisters live in the *cours commune* (shared compound) where he grew up. This compound is close to where he was born, a village that has since become incorporated into the townships that sprawl around Abidjan. Kouamé's parents are now quite elderly, and his mother is paralyzed on her right side from a stroke. His two brothers have "modern" jobs: one is a policeman and the other is a nurse. His mother's illness is a constant source of tension between Kouamé and his family. While Kouamé paid for modern medicines for her, his brothers and sisters have insisted on treating her with traditional medicines, thereby crystallizing the conflict with his siblings over his authority within the family. Advocating the use of modern medicine and a modern approach to treating his mother's disability is Kouamé's way of demonstrating that he could have a role in the family even though he would not have children and was, therefore, refusing a fundamental responsibility.

After a while, I realized that Kouamé's fury at his family's insistence on traditional medicines betrayed his anger at his family's refusal of his "modernity" that the insistence on traditional medicines implied.

In the city, Kouamé's charismatic personality rapidly earned him a place at the center of a vast constellation of friends, acquaintances, fans, and hangers-on. The relationship with Hans, who Kouamé characterizes as "the love of my life," did not, however, survive the ups and downs of Kouamé's tumultuous flirtations, seductions, and affairs with the succession of young men who were attracted to him. In spite of these relationships he wanted to settle down with an African man. A few months after his break-up with Hans, and after a succession of rowdy affairs with African boys, Kouamé told me that he "wasn't interested" in local boys anymore. They are "all the same": either "they're just with you for financial gain" and not "truly" gay, or they are "silly queens," of whom one tires easily. Needless to say, by then he had launched into a new project.

Bored with his day job at the import-export firm, Kouamé opened a maquis in the city's zone 4 nightlife district. The maquis was a stall perched on the side of a busy road, with low tables and chairs spilling out onto the street. Inside the simple wood structure with its sand floor were a few tables and a bar. Behind the bar was a simple kitchen that produced Ivoirian favorites such as grilled chicken, fried plantain, peanut sauce, and fried potatoes. Kouamé's addition to the traditional Ivoirian recipes was a chili-pepper and palm oil paste enriched with mashed garlic, briefly earning the bar the nickname "Mapouka-Piment."[5] Consonant with his relentless good humor, charisma, and high profile in the milieu (with a push from his succession of dramatic affairs and with their scandalous behaviors) the maquis became a focal point for the milieu. The maquis was also frequented by Liberian refugees who appreciated the generous sampling of American rhythm and blues music that Kouamé enjoyed listening to while he cooked. The Liberians always ordered the same thing, and as a result, the Mapouka-Piment eventually became known as "One-Chicken."

In those years when Kouamé ran One-Chicken all night and worked in the office by day, I often wondered when he slept. The evenings spent at One-Chicken often degenerated into long nights at tawdry zouk bars, raucous karaoke clubs, and "Lebanese" (techno) nightclubs. By then Kouamé had moved out of Hans's apartment and into another on the twelfth floor of one of the blocks of modernist highrises built in the 1970s in the 220 Logements quarter of Adjamé township. As a housewarming present, Hans had given Kouamé a small poodle ("Kwa-kwa"), thus increasing his notoriety in the

neighborhood. He moved there with a clutch of young men, including cousins from the village sent to live with him while they went to school, a succession of youths he had "adopted" in his neighborhood encounters, and two nephews. None of these young men were homosexual, but they enjoyed accompanying Kouamé on his evenings out and they clearly worshipped him. One of his nephews went on to graduate as an officer from military college, and he still comes to stay with his uncle whenever he is on leave.

Despite being on the twelfth floor without a functioning elevator, Kouamé's apartment was the hub of a lively social scene. The various youths that congregated there were readily pressed into service in preparing evening meals under Kouamé's supervision. During the meal, programs on television were the focus of attention and the object of much loud commentary and gossip. The crowd favorites were the Brazilian and Mexican soap operas that preceded the evening news, second only to appearances of the nation's first lady on the news program, which were regularly greeted by loud shrieks and sarcastic commentary regarding her hair, her skin color ("if she uses any more skin lightener she'll peel"), and the self-serving nature of her good deeds. The social life at Kouamé's place quietened down after the coup in 1999, however—business was not so good and he had to cut down on expenses. With less food to go around, visitors couldn't count on getting a meal there and they dropped by less frequently as a result.

By then Kouamé's homosocial network and his business connections had converged around Positive Nation. The young men who revolved around Kouamé and his apartment were inevitably invited to Positive Nation meetings, and vice versa. Positive Nation, with its institutional track record built up over the years of the AIDS epidemic, was able to access capital that other start-up businesses could never dream of obtaining from tight-fisted Ivoirian banks. Kouamé applied his business acumen to starting up "revenue-generating" activities for the organization—first a small shop, then a restaurant and café. The success of these enterprises was largely due to Kouamé's managerial skills and flair for mobilizing his vast social network to generate a clientèle; however, the ability of the NGO to obtain investment for what were not quite purely commercial ventures doubtlessly played a role.

Positive Nation's café has gradually come to replace One-Chicken on the local scene, and it has become an important intersection of homosocial and AIDS activist social networks. The rhetoric of openness about sexuality that has been the hallmark of Positive Nation (as seen by their explicit educational materials) has meant that the organization and the meeting spaces that its activities create have instilled a culture of sexual openness that has made it

easier for members such as Christophe and Kouamé to be open about their sexual preferences, and for others such as Karim to access these networks. As a node in these social networks, the organization is also a focal point for the transmission of knowledge about the social worlds that intersect there. Within the space of NGOs such as Positive Nation, AIDS had been somewhat of a social leveler, bringing together wealthy, middle-class, and poor Ivoirians in the same social space, much as religion might. As a result, the NGO allows knowledge about different social worlds to flow where they might otherwise not.

In addition to the impact of these mechanical juxtapositions, the NGO and the discourses for which it serves as a vehicle have shaped the trajectories of its members as they partake and mobilize these social epistemologies and use them to negotiate social relations, as we have seen in the stories of Christophe and Kouamé. In this quasi public social sphere, practices of self-fashioning have circulated as part of the international toolkit for addressing the AIDS epidemic. International agencies, trumpeting an agenda that sought to address the ravages of the HIV epidemic through "negotiated sex," "empowerment," and "greater involvement of people living with HIV and AIDS" enrolled Positive Nation in interventions and workshops that stressed sexual openness and creating enabling environments for people with HIV to come out about their diagnosis and reinforce prevention efforts by testifying publicly about being HIV positive in order to "give a face" to the epidemic. This agenda was not limited to rhetoric, however, as powerful techniques were used to train members in the latest HIV prevention techniques: peer-to-peer interventions, "sexual health training," and eliciting testimonials of HIV positive people about their illness. These techniques—role playing, demonstrations, open-ended questions—were essentially social technologies or portable mechanisms for creating standardized forms of "telling the self" and, through them, fashioning the self. As a result, Positive Nation's members became fluent in the sexual culture of post-1960s America and Europe.

The narratives that have been elicited by Positive Nation, whether they are the coming-out stories these individuals tell each other or the stories of illness solicited by the AIDS industry, hybridized with the rumors that allow tellers and listeners to position themselves in a shifting and precarious social landscape. Being able to tell the self and tell about others—both confessing and rumoring—juxtaposes older problematizations of sexuality and gender as performance with newer, more Western forms where these are linked to sexual identity. Sex is no longer about what one does but rather what one is. In Abidjan's kaleidoscopic world that juxtaposes wealth and poverty, mod-

ernist hopes and Third World despair, these confessional technologies articulate with local epistemologies and materialist tactics to define the uses of pleasure.

I have argued here that sexuality is more a product of the tactics that are used to assuage desire—for pleasure, beauty, or material security—than a preexisting essence. The emphasis on recounting illness experience—and disclosure about sex—concatenates as an iterative practice of telling the self that produces identity—whether the sexual identity of homosexual men such as Kouamé and Christophe or the biological identity of the HIV positive members of Positive Nation. By the time I collected Christophe's and Kouamé's stories they had already been fashioned into a familiar "coming-out" narrative, whose soteriological themes of dawning awareness, self-discovery, and self-realization mirrored those of the HIV positive members of Positive Nation. These were, of course, not "just-so" stories—rather, their telling had material effects and, ultimately, biological ones. Several of the young people who joined Positive Nation out of more tactical concerns eventually took the rhetoric of getting tested seriously enough to undergo HIV testing themselves, only to find out that they were themselves HIV positive. Among those so afflicted were Christophe and Kouamé.

Conclusion

Early accounts of Abidjan's homosocial milieu show how the city's reputation for sexual liberalism encouraged experimentation with alternative notions of gender and, as a result, highlight its playful and performative dimensions. In contrast, a consideration of today's homosexual milieu in Abidjan shows that discursive practices—narratives of "coming out," rumors, and gossip—cannot be isolated from the way in which individuals come to experience themselves as sexual subjects. The way in which people imagine themselves and their sexuality—as a true, "inner identity" that is "uncovered" at key points in time, sometimes simply as sexual or romantic fantasy, or as a dream of being emotionally and materially taken care of—structures their rapport with the social world around them and helps to construct both social and sexual networks.

Rumors are a key element in the construction of these networks. Rumoring is neither frivolous gossip nor a "hidden transcript" (Scott 1990) that allows people to quietly criticize those in power. Pleasure and power are key elements of rumoring, but in an urban setting they are important sources of knowledge. The cheek-to-jowl social inequality of the city means that getting

food into one's stomach, or perhaps even getting rich, is just a story away—a story that can net a sugar daddy, or a good scam, or a business secret, or a miraculous cure, or simply where one might have dinner. As I have shown, the NGOs introduced confessional technologies that conjugated with the narratives and the material effects they produced on existing social networks. These confessional technologies were tactically taken up by individuals to fashion themselves and to address a broad range of material needs and desires. The AIDS prevention efforts, and the NGO mechanisms through which they were disseminated, allowed homosexual men to organize a quasi public space, legitimated by a culture of sexual openness, within which "gayness" could be cautiously affirmed.

Those NGOs such as Positive Nation are also nodes in these networks. Certainly, the AIDS industry's advocacy of sexual openness allowed men like Christophe and Kouamé to imagine NGOs as quasi public spheres within which their sexuality could be expressed. This expression included the aesthetic dimension of desire—the search for an ideal partner either in looks, sexual practices, or identity. In addition, for others, these spaces offered the opportunity of accessing social networks where material gain could be found. For men like Karim, economic and sexual desire are indistinguishable, and homosocial spaces offer opportunities for bettering their condition through the agile use of the technologies of the self they could find there. For these men, the aesthetic dimension of sexuality was materialist—fashioning one's sexuality and one's story in such a way as to be able better to confront the material and emotional hardships of a city and a world struck by deepening poverty and the increasingly elusive dreams of wealth and ease.

Notes

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1 See Fisher 1997 for a descriptive review of the anthropology of NGOs. Fassin 1994 and Pigg 2001b offer more critical approaches to AIDS and NGOs. For a more general critique of the role of NGOs and humanitarians, see Appadurai 2000; Pandolfi 2002; and Rabinow 2001.

2 The story of Boubar, Oscar, and the "scene" in the late 1970s and 1980s was pieced together from my interviews with informants, as well as from the work of Claudine Vidal (1979) and Vidal and Marc Le Pape (1984). I am particularly grateful to Vidal and Le Pape for forwarding to me certain difficult-to-find publications, including Kader 1976; Paulus 1983; and Mandel 1982. All other undocumented quotes in this essay are from my interviews with informants conducted in 1999–2003.

3 The term derives from the acronym for Société des Ambienceurs et des Personnes

Élégantes, an urban club that started as a social-intellectual group but later became a male fashion and elegance club that introduced stylish European fashion to colonial Brazzaville.

4 The distinction is explored in the 1998 documentary *Woubi chéri*, which was written and directed by Philip Brooks and Laurent Bocahut (Dominant 7 Productions/la Sept ARTE, Paris).

5 *Mapouka* is a traditional Ivoirian dance that is noted for its rhythmic shaking of the buttocks. The conjugation with *piment* (hot pepper) connotes a rather spicier version of the dance, which was the subject of some controversy at the time. Purists decried the new improvisations of the dance as pornographic, while modernists pointed out that the updated dance had made a name for Abidjan in the African dance world.