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SOUND, MUSIC, AND MEDIA

KAHLIL JOSEPH AND THE AUDIOVISUAL ATLANTIC

MUSIC, MODERNITY, TRANSMEDIA ART



Joe Jackson

Foreword by Clive Chijioke Nwonka

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Kahlil Joseph and the Audiovisual Atlantic

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Kahlil Joseph and the Audiovisual Atlantic: Music, Modernity, Transmedia Art

by Joe Jackson

Praise for *Kahlil Joseph and the Audiovisual Atlantic*

This is a book that powerfully explores the creative work of Kahlil Joseph through an audiovisual Black Atlantic lens. This allows the writing to use a significant artistic figure to both decolonize our understanding of Blackness and Black identity, and to create a rhizomic map that newly and uniquely connects and articulates the threads of Black (art) history across time, space and cultural trajectories and legacies. The intervention, to show how sound is as essential as seeing, to demonstrate how audio carries identities on the images they are wedded to, is beautifully conceived, argued and illustrated. A pleasure and privilege to read, think and feel on.

Sean Redmond, Professor of Film and Television, Deakin University, Australia, and author of Liquid Space: Science Film and Television in the Digital Age (Bloomsbury, 2017)

Joe Jackson has succeeded in capturing the richness of Kahlil Joseph's multifaceted creative journey by situating it within the broader context of his time. He transforms it into an epic where interests and ideals collide. Definitely a thought-provoking text.

Karine Barclais, Founder, Pavillon Afriques at Cannes Film Festival – Marché du Film

Kahlil Joseph and the Audiovisual Atlantic understands that we live in a digital era where media businesses are becoming increasingly entangled. Written in an accessible style, the book offers promising new perspectives on the global film, music video and advertising industries. A useful read for producers and practitioners as well as university audiences who want to learn more about international production today.

Jean-Frédéric Garcia, Managing Director, The Location Guide

If you want to make sense of contemporary Black cultural production, this is a must-read book. A moving, revolutionary and multi-modal reading experience at the crossroads of Black cultural studies, race, and media studies. Joe Jackson offers the very first in-depth study of award-winning filmmaker Kahlil Joseph's subversive creative work with remarkable rigour, care and radical engagement, leading to the theorization of the *audiovisual Atlantic*. Words that become sound, images and feelings, which affectively challenge the 'white racial frame' in today's understandings of modernity.

Estrella Sendra, Lecturer in Culture, Media and Creative Industries Education (Events and Festivals), King's College London, UK

Kahlil Joseph and the Audiovisual Atlantic illuminates the transmedia and bold diasporic stylings of Kahlil Joseph's audio-visual artworks in all of their perplexing, and sometimes contradictory, glory. Jackson eruditely positions Kahlil's offerings at the nexus of Africa, America and Europe and at the intersection of art and capital in a way that holds a mirror up to the digitized neoliberal era we live in today. Jackson never loses site of the humanism and cultural pluralism that underpins Kahlil Joseph's films, music videos and commercials and in so doing, manages to foreground this same humanism and pluralism in his writing, making for an incredibly insightful read.

Michael W. Thomas, Lecturer in Film and Screen Studies, SOAS, University of London, UK, and author of Popular Ethiopian Cinema: Love and other Genres (Bloomsbury, 2022)

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Music, Modernity, Transmedia Art

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because of Caspar
remembering Benji, Hristo, Malcolm and Veselin

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Foreword

Clive Chijioke Nwonka

Associate Professor of Film, Culture and Society, University College London

In the continuously generative but complex encounter with Black visibility that remains in a protracted contestation against and through the ossified hegemony of white normativity to demand anti-Eurocentric looking practices and to express, and have acknowledged, Afrodiasporic artistic principles, there is an inherent politics of difference that guides our navigation through the intersections of Black life, visual identity, technology and capitalism. Much of the thinking behind my idea of a Black Neoliberal Aesthetic (2022), of which this book displays an interest in and which in turn finds a shared but asymmetrically evinced genealogy with this book in an indebtedness to Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), attempted to grapple with the social, cultural, political and aesthetic terms through which creative endeavours claim and possess an instinctive Black diasporic extensivity. In the work of the visual practitioner Kahlil Joseph, such an encounter, with the omnipresence of Blackness at the emotional and conceptual formation of a creative agenda that oscillates between a number of mediums and stylistic approaches, would naturally compel us to conclude that Joseph's aesthetic practice, à la the Black Atlantic, orchestrates a seamless, organic and horizontal textual, representational and spectatorial convergence between Black America, Africa, the Caribbean and Europe.

With this in mind, the book aims to situate Joseph's creative practices at the central point of an analytical nexus that attempts to draw the Black audio-visual analyses of Gilroy, Tina Campt, Stuart Hall and my own conceptual endeavours (that argue that capitalism's more hegemonic orchestration of popular Black visibility at the level of context produces a neoliberal affect at the level of text, despite their distinctive geographical epistemologies) into both a departing dialect and a corresponding synergy. However, the purpose of Jackson's intellectual engagement with the concept and his subsequent analytical investment in the application of this to the range of overlapping tensions across Joseph's audio-visual oeuvre cannot be determined in the simple, linear identification within Joseph's work of the instances in which an uncomplicated Black Neoliberal Aesthetic, applied either pejoratively as the index of the glacial accumulation of the production and products of Black culture by the economic, contextual and textual determinants of capitalism or the essentialist strategy of Black creatives in consolidating a space within the heavily contested field of cultural production in its most popular iterations as necessity within contemporary cultural hegemony as a war of position, reveals itself to undermine any claim to authenticity, realness, or the legitimate articulation and representation of local or transglobal Black identity. To accept this as such would be to neglect all that is

distinctive in, and central to, the task of the multidimensional cultural analysis that has been historically undertaken in the more interrogative inflections of Black cultural studies and its dissection of the genealogies, industrial contexts and social circulation of Black visual culture, that certainly became the mandative interests of Hall, Spillers, Mercer, Gilroy, Snead and many others, and this book in many ways coalesces on the intellectual examples of these works to establish a stable analytical framework that can retain an interpretative value within the shifting meanings of audio-visual culture. Indeed, as we'll encounter in this book, as Joseph's creative outputs venture beyond the arenas afforded by digital technology and its attendant modes of distribution and into the more esoteric and socio-geographically marked exhibition spaces, there is a need to match in analytical rigour and flexibility the very hybridity and heterogeneity of not only Joseph's creative output but the relationships and points of interaction that are argued here to be a novel feature of an audio-visual oeuvre that is engaged in a generative, dynamic but tension-laden and translocational racial context.

In considering some of the thinking on the construction of Joseph's Afrodiasporic artworks offered here by Jackson, Joseph's work can be described as born from and circulating within an ecology of contesting aesthetes, of Black identification and recognition, where the bidirectional flow of its relationships across space, time, medium, identity and territory renders such a dynamic to aptly be termed as a certain cultural traffic. However, our engagement with this aesthetic conglomeration is one that should not be extracted of all interrogative and, at points, critical evaluation. This being that within Joseph's audio-visual work we encounter the very contradictions and paradoxes that display a fidelity to the equally cosmopolitan flows of neoliberalism that mark Joseph's creative practice as it osculates between the very public arena of Black popular culture and the private spaces of the exhibition rooms that his installation work occupies and becomes naturally embedded in the arcane, spectatorial and interpretative language forms of the gallery context. What comes to the foreground in our reading of what this book interprets as the collaborative nature of Joseph's audio-visual practice is what occurs and what is accrued and refracted back to us as it moves not just to the centrifugal instincts of the diffuse spectatorships of the Black Atlantic but equally to the orchestration of the capitalistic instincts of the extractive spectacularizing of racial difference that undoubtedly find a sometimes covert and sometimes conspicuous regulating position within the very fissures of the new audio-visual technologies and modes of consumption that have expanded, accentuated and expedited its permeation and consumption throughout the territories of the Black Atlantic and beyond. Equally, our interpretations of Joseph's multidimensional Black creative practice, as this book attempts, must emerge as cognizant of the intellectual and spiritual hazards of Black scholarly hagiography, where the fascination with the spectacle of racial difference in all its performativity and authenticity to be observed in the production of Black culture becomes superimposed and fixed onto an uncritical liberal aggrandizing of the textual representations of Black life, Black art forms and its both unified and at times singular circulation within any given social and critical juncture, particularly those that, in renovating Stuart Hall's instructive on the unguaranteed critical Black politics that is claimed in the essentializing of the Black subject, allow for neoliberalist

market orthodoxies to fix Black identity and our attendant, disparate and convergent Afrodiasporic cultural and subcultural forms within a standardizing logic of an all-encompassing Black cultural value. As we are now coming into a more fuller understanding and appreciation of such neoliberal entanglements via the paradigms of cultural studies, Black studies, literature or their interdisciplinary meeting points, just as the cyclical junctures of race that inevitably accompany our most violent and damaging moments of anti-Blackness, the subsequent proliferation of celebratory Black works can result in our interrogation of the ethics of representation becoming overwhelmed by the sheer thrust of the dispersal of often institutionalized and compensatory notions of Black culture and cultural artefacts that, as we observed in the wake of George Floyd and the American Summer, can successfully conceal an undiminished racism within a temporary and reactive appreciation for Black audio, visual and literary excellence. With this in mind, and notwithstanding the myopia of such racial junctures, the study of Black visual culture and moving image remains as a fugitive scholarship that emerges from and is respondent to the tenors of race struggle within an academic industrial complex where the vital question of ethics, verticality, extraction, positionality, asymmetrical looking practices, power relations and racialized gazes cannot be simply theorized into insignificance via a recourse to the most unsophisticated, misinterpretative, simplified and permissible citational engagements with the readings of Black music and audio-visual culture as practised throughout the various disciplinary analyses of Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, nor be assumed as immaterial in the postmodernist celebration of Black audio-visual cultures and practices as an uncomplicated site of racial and cultural conviviality, but actively worked through within the very practice of cultural criticism.

What is offered to us in *Kahlil Joseph and the Audiovisual Atlantic* is a book that is not simply concerned with the chronological tracing of Kahlil Joseph's various creative guises from film, video and music to art installation, but one that asks pertinent questions that *The Black Neoliberal Aesthetic*, in all its nascent theoretical provocations, opens up for further exploration. What aesthetic, economic and transcultural dialectics and cohabitations are to be found in the capaciousness of Black audio-visual cultures as it circulates across multiple Black geographies? What is it that we actually look for in the study of Black cultural production? How are its meaning and affects arrived at, and what is revealed to us when we consider the totality of its constitutive elements, which, in this book's example, are to be explored in what Jackson will argue is a body of work comprised of crossroads and Black Atlanticist meeting points that give the work the functions of an aesthetics of resistance? These questions naturally require answers that are beyond the ambit of any single intellectual endeavour, let alone one that is invested in the diverse creative outputs of a single visual practitioner. But this is also revealing of what is most generative about the ideas and readings proposed in this book. It is part of the continuum of the intellectual and non-intellectual study of Black cultural forms, Black cultural production and the corresponding investments from a multitude of positions, imperatives and meanings. That the neoliberal reconfiguration of the production, circulation and terms of Black culture is so heavily layered and multi-constituted, the parenthesis to my own conceptual exploration is that if, and

if so how, are the products, artefacts and audio-visual practices of the Black creative imagination reliable and affirmative entry points into an examination, understanding and appreciation of Black life worlds? This remains defined by a contradiction and paradox that revels in the cohabitation of both the carnivalesque enthusiasm for the images of Black identity and anti-blackness in its specific but consenting curation of the most hegemonic image streams of Black identity. In this focused reading of Kahlil Joseph's creative oeuvre, Jackson offers a multi and intra disciplinary study that places his audio-visual works at the nexus of a theoretical synthesis of a number of creative optics. Indeed, what we'll find to be this book's primary interdisciplinary thesis – that we are unable to fully comprehend the heterogeneous and unstable nature of Joseph's visual outputs without the attendant understanding of the methodological possibilities, rather than the wholesale application onto a contemporary Afrodiasporic creative artefact, of Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, which in itself provides an intellectual framework where the very interpretative approaches to be found in this landmark text share a rhizomatic genealogy, trajectory and reach – speaks not just to the non-linearity of Joseph's practice, but to its very transience across the Black Atlantic's various points of interaction, connection and contention.

Introduction

1.1 Kahlil Joseph, art and knowledge

The camera focuses on Alice Smith singing. A jamming session nears its end, she holds the note for one last time: nothing else matters, for a few precious moments it feels impossible to see or hear anything else. *I Put a Spell on You* – originally written and composed by Jalacy ‘Screaming Jay’ Hawkins in 1957 – has been covered numerous times, perhaps most notably by musician and civil rights activist Nina Simone in 1965. Here, in a short film commissioned by the Tate Modern in London to coincide with its exhibition *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, the song is electrified with new meaning, drawing visual inspiration from Simone’s politicized, proudly Afrocentric headscarves and kaftans as well as the black and white (predominantly Black) photography of Roy DeCarava, all the while playing with and reconfiguring a constellation of musical lineages from Hawkins to Smith by way of the pathbreaking High Priestess of Soul herself. These are the ‘spellbinding’ final moments of *Black Mary* (2017) – at once a short film, music video, installation piece and far more – that in turn exemplify the interdisciplinary, transcontinental energies underpinning the work of filmmaker Kahlil Joseph. What follows in this book is a deep exploration of the director’s transmedia art, his sonic *and* visual influences and their relationship(s) to the Black Atlantic in its broadest sense, tracing movements back and forth Africa, America, Europe and the Caribbean or, in other words, the multidirectional ebbs and flows that dynamize what this book terms: the Audiovisual Atlantic.¹

Kahlil Joseph – the professional name of Kahlil Davis – is a multi-award-winning African-American filmmaker, music video director and installation artist, as well as the recipient of a Special Jury Award at the Sundance Film Festival 2012, a John Simon

¹ The English word ‘Africa’ is loaded with diverse meanings and origins, stemming from the Berber signification for ‘cave’ (Geo 1903), the Phoenician word for ‘dust’ (Venter and Neuland 2005) and a Punic term for the indigenous population of Carthage (Cox 1988), as well as possessing the Greek meaning for ‘without cold or fear’ (Africanus 2010 [1550]) and the Latin signification for an area of Africa – possibly Libya – to the West of the Nile (Lewis 1879). Although I refer to ‘Africa’ in the continental sense, I also recognize that geographical areas, as well as discursive meanings, situated under the umbrella term ‘Africa’ have shifted and changed throughout history, and therefore address in detail moments of contestation surrounding the continent’s physical and metaphysical identities when such tensions arise. On a similar note, while I refer to skin pigmentation when I use the lowercase ‘b’ for ‘black’ or ‘blackness’, I refer to metaphysical discourses which orbit around the cultures of black people when I capitalize ‘Black’, ‘Blackness’ or ‘Black-Britishness’. The same applies for ‘whiteness’ and ‘White’.

Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in 2016, an Eye Art & Film Prize in 2020 and the Herb Alpert Award in Arts in 2021. He has collaborated across a range of media formats with musicians Alice Smith, Aloe Blacc, Beyoncé, FKA twigs, Flying Lotus, Kelsey Lu, Kendrick Lamar, Sampha, Seu Jorge and Shabazz Palaces, as well as the fashion labels KENZO and Vans, and telecommunications company 02, developing into one of – if not *the* – visual artist(s) of choice to accompany musicians (re)making Black popular music in the twenty-first century.

Joseph's audiovisual works frequently combine contemporary African-American and Black-British music with various visual references to continental African culture, citing Yoruba deities, Senegalese film masters and Bantu-Kongo cosmology while expressing the multi-layered experiences of contemporary African diasporas in a variety of contexts, settings and situations. When harnessing the transnational flows of Afrocentric musical lineages, Joseph forges a range of formal and informal relationships between the encoded messages of his audiovisual works, contemporary communication technologies through which his art is circulated (laptops, mobile phones, televisions, projections) and new spaces in which his art is consumed (living rooms, bedrooms, classrooms, parties, lectures, public discussions).

Joseph's collection of work frequently merges visual representations of transcontinental experiences with Afrodiasporic music's countercultural energies,



Figure 1.1 Director Kahlil Joseph and Assistant Curator at MOCA Lanka Tattersall attend MOCA's Leadership Circle and Members' Opening of 'Carl Andre: Sculpture as Place, 1958–2010' and 'Arthur Jafa: Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death' on 1 April 2017 in Los Angeles, California. Photo by Donato Sardella/Getty Images for MOCA.

thereby presenting alternative frameworks for contemporaneity that subvert the Eurocentricity and latent Whiteness underpinning modernity in the West. The situatedness of Joseph's works in 'traditional' settings for art (such as museums, galleries and cinemas) thus creates new opportunities for countercultural discourses, challenging the Eurocentric heritage of art gallery spectatorship and its relationship to Westernized distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture. At the same time, Joseph's works create numerous paradoxes and tensions because these screen texts are products located within an economic world system of neoliberal capitalism. The content of his work often critiques this world system, at once presenting alternative ways of navigating the present moment yet also participating in – and thus sustaining – the dominant societal frameworks that it otherwise attempts to challenge.

In order to disentangle and scrutinize the tensions that arise as Joseph's works oscillate between cultural spheres on both local, regional and national levels, one must recognize that Joseph's screen texts operate as nodes within numerous theoretical networks concurrently, reflecting the present world system's complex network environment. Throughout this book, I tie together strands of Alexander Weheliye's sonic Afro-modernity (2005) and Tsitsi Ella Jaji's stereomodernism theories (2014) with the crossroads concepts from Harry J. Elam Jr and Kenneth Jackson's *Black Cultural Traffic* (2005) and Akinwumi Adesokan's *Postcolonial Artists and Global Aesthetics* (2011), forming dialogues between Weheliye and Jaji's ideas and Arthur Jafa's *Black Visual Intonations* (1992), Tina Camp's still-moving-images (2019), Clive Chijioke Nwonka's *Black Neoliberal Aesthetic* (2020) and Jenn Nkiru and Zara Julius's respective boundless/marked time notions (2020). By generating conversations between a range of aural and visual theories that are shaped by Paul Gilroy's conceptualization of the Black Atlantic (1993), I examine the crossroads between cultural traffic, capital and aesthetics throughout Joseph's art. I scrutinize the director's work through overlaps of emergent music video and new media theories that emphasize hybridity – drawing from the perspectives of African film, music and media theorists as well as American and European voices where they are relevant – and thereby demonstrate how the transnational flows of Joseph's work bring contemporary Black Atlantic music into conversation with continental African filmmaking, arguing that such an interdisciplinary approach enriches the possibilities of their respective and, simultaneously, entwined branches of knowledge.

As Paul Gilroy's ground-breaking text *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) emphasizes, myriad forms of Afrocentric musical expression can move across geographical borders and communicate complex feelings beyond the limitations of language, capturing 'the reconciliation of art and life' if we think beyond neoliberal structures and dare to rescue music 'from its status as a mere commodity' (Gilroy 1993: 124). Throughout the book, I apply the disruptive audiocentric ideas underscoring Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* to contemporary media forms generated by Kahlil Joseph and his peers alike, drawing from Carol Vernallis's argument that music and moving images may merge on an ontological level when sharing digital code (Vernallis in Vernallis, Rogers and Perrott 2020). My research thus seeks to challenge the latent formations of Whiteness and underlying Eurocentricity on which today's

dominant theorizations of ‘modernity’ are grounded, offering an alternative framework for negotiating the dizzying contradictions and multidirectional, intercontinental transensory flows of our media-saturated present: namely, the Audiovisual Atlantic.

Although I am visibly identifiable as white and openly identify as British, this book draws heavily from academic theories across different continents, focuses on the flows of Joseph’s art and Gilroy’s ideas across Africa, America, Europe and the Caribbean, and is intrinsically shaped by my own subjective British experiences which are influenced by – yet not always directly connected to – these various parts of the world. While neat ‘race-symmetrical’ and ‘race-matched’ relationships between researchers and research topics can, in many situations, ‘make productive contributions to research practices’ by generating rich, meaningful conversations based on one’s own lived experiences (Vass 2017: 137–8), Nicola Rollock observes that blindly adopting such an approach at all times, in all circumstances, risks compartmentalizing the complexities of human experience by moving towards the controversial direction of ‘narrow, essentialist interpretation[s] or race’ (Rollock 2013: 499). She argues that, in certain situations, we might glean far more valuable forms of knowledge by focusing ‘on the political awareness of the researcher and their proactive engagement with notion[s] of whiteness and blackness’ (ibid. 506), reminding white researchers who do choose to carry out race research that they bear ‘a particular responsibility to critically reflect upon and demonstrate awareness of ... the dynamics of race and their responses to it’ (ibid.). Throughout this book, I have thus attempted to consider deeply questions relating to ‘my own racial, ethnic, cultural and social position’ both within and far beyond the narrow confinements of academia, striving to be ‘explicitly cognisant of where and how knowledge is constructed’ within educational environments while, at the same time, remembering ‘the nature and importance of representation’ outside such scholarly contexts (Ramdeo 2023).

In this sense – as will be discussed in further detail in the *Seeing and Hearing the Black Atlantic: Audiovisual Art as Counterculture of Modernity (1.3.1)* section – I have found the work of Obioma Nnaemeka particularly helpful when trying to navigate carefully my personal ‘complicities and engagements ... of and with whiteness’ during various stages of writing and researching (Mirzoeff 2023: vii). Nnaemeka’s conceptualization of ‘nego-feminism’ as an Afrocentric philosophy ‘structured by cultural imperatives and modulated by ever-shifting local and global exigencies’ offers ways to challenge the ‘reification of a construct or framework’ (Nnaemeka 2004: 378) such as ‘the cultural unconscious of whiteness’ and the ways that this all-consuming framework privileges ‘white reality’ over the experiences of others (Mirzoeff 2023: 4). While Stuart Hall reminds us of the dangers of ignoring and downplaying ‘the difficult problems that arise from trying to live with difference’ (Hall 1993a: 363), Nnaemeka argues that research perspectives underpinned by ‘negotiation’ and ‘no ego’ (Nnaemeka 2004: 360) allow us to better process ‘the multiple perspectives *and challenges* rooted in heterogeneity’ (my emphasis) (ibid. 378). In turn, a ‘nego-feminist’ approach has helped me develop and sustain a ‘critically reflexive practice’ when writing this book ‘crucial to making the process of whiteness visible’ where it might otherwise parade unseen and underexplored somewhere in the background (Rollock 2013: 507).