



A Book Review of Joe Jackson's *Kahlil Joseph and the Audiovisual Atlantic: Music, Modernity, and Transmedia Art* (Bloomsbury Academic 2024)

By Nedine Moonsamy

The first of its kind, this book offers unique and concentrated insight into Kahlil Joseph's oeuvre. It takes seriously the role of black popular culture and the complex space that creators like Joseph occupy in the global capitalist imaginary. At the outset, Jackson opines that his assessment of Joseph is not merely a celebratory take, but one that immerses Joseph, and his work, in contemporary issues of class, capitalism, and race. What emerges is a careful exploration of the vibrant and productive contradictions that mobilise Joseph's career. Jackson argues that Joseph's success comes from navigating these tensions – as opposed to seeking to resolve them – which has made him a central figure of the Audiovisual Atlantic.

In seeking to explore the Audiovisual Atlantic as an aesthetic, Paul Gilroy's earlier insights on the Black Atlantic are duly interrogated; Jackson questions what Gilroy's identification of black countercultural production means in a world where Black identity and anti-capitalistic ideologies are inevitably subject to commodification. Jackson also makes other crucial interventions, like considering the wider dimensions of the *audiovisual* (as opposed to Gilroy's auditory emphasis in understanding diasporic connection) as well as the neglected geographies of blackness – like the Caribbean and Africa – that often garner less attention in the global black imaginary.

While many shy away from biographical analysis, Jackson draws generative parallels between Joseph's life in chapter one and his early work in chapter two. This comparative reading creates awareness of how Joseph's personal biography challenges stable notions of identity, which clearly informs the foundations of his creative outlook in the media industry. As a result of his personal and professional agility, Joseph's audiovisual art captures the joy and trauma of contemporary Black identity through his creative experimentation, but these works are also susceptible to reinforcing stereotypes about Blackness and perpetuating discursive oppression. In this regard, Jackson argues that "Joseph's audiovisual works are both meeting points *and* sites of contestation where different parts of the world interact" (p.40). As Jackson argues, Kahlil Joseph plays with, and even contests, the divide between marketing and cinema, which speaks to the existential condition of Blackness as both counterculturally creative and yet overdetermined by neoliberal capitalism.

Chapter three is an eloquent exploration of the history of the music video, which further illustrates how Joseph draws on this legacy while also corrupting it through his blurring of music videos, films and adverts. Jackson boldly challenges Joseph's appeals to artistic and independent creative integrity by exploring how his work raises ethical concerns about the commercialisation of African American experiences. Yet in comparing Kahlil Joseph's and Derek Pike's *I Need a Dollar*, Jackson demonstrates how Joseph's rendition "offer[s] helpful avenues for articulating feelings and sensations which transcend the impersonal logic and mechanics of the marketplace" (p.97).

As he argues, the audiovisual makes an appeal to the affective and sensorial aspects of the human condition, letting it bleed in-between the gaps of capitalistic categorisation, which allows for a new countercultural sensibility to emerge.

Chapter four addresses how Joseph's involvement in the community arts space has also allowed for new countercultural possibilities. Through his founding of The Underground Museum, and his willingness to crossover into the elitist gallery space, Joseph challenges the Eurocentricism of museums by altering perceptions of popular culture as mass consumerism. Exhibiting collaborations with *Flying Lotus* and Kendrick Lamar in art galleries blends the high and the low and interrogates the limits of the museum as a space for Black expression. Also, in this chapter, I enjoyed how Joseph's *Flying Lotus* collaborations are explored through the lens of Afrofuturism. Given that Afrofuturism explores black identity at the margins of the Human space-time trajectory and harnesses disruption as an aesthetic for alternative expression, it provides keen insight into how Blackness orients itself with the aporia of modernity, and a more affirmative exploration of what Afrofuturism *also enables* would have been a good counterbalance to Jackson's scepticism that this too succumbs to the dangers of a neoliberal black aesthetic.

In chapter five, Jackson provides luminous analyses of Joseph's collaborations with British artists like FKA Twigs and Sampha which highlights how black popular culture is realised as a liberatory aesthetic for artistic freedom and self-expression. Moreover, these collaborative works, "fluctuating at the borders of distinguishable media forms", are also subject to geographical interpretation as Joseph's stylistic fluidity is seen as indicative of broader Black and Afrodiasporic identity and aesthetics (p.117). Yet despite Joseph's ability to generate points of diasporic connection, Jackson also unpacks how a work like *Process* (2017) "undermines the countercultural messages that it articulates so eloquently" since the Sierra Leonean dancers involved in the work were initially unable to access it on their local distribution channels (p.156).

The final chapter continues to think about "the uneven flows of knowledge" and the "imbalanced framework for distribution" that persist in the African diaspora as Jackson unpacks the rise of

contemporary African diasporic arts, which has garnered exposure for creatives like Baloji and Jenn Nkiru (p.156). Yet in comparison to the focused framing in previous chapters, the connection between the contemporary African diaspora and more recent works from Joseph's oeuvre, like *Flypaper* and *BLKNWS*, seems opaque. While the archival intersplicing of Joseph's work "generates alternative forms of sociality", it is unclear about how much of this interaction seeks to include contemporary Africa (p.181). Hence, while the inventiveness of *BLKNWS* certainly speaks to the awareness of the digital spread of global black identity, the work can also be critiqued as an

echo chamber of African American identity that perpetuates the exclusion of the 'dead zones' of the African diaspora.

Overall, Jackson's first book is a thorough analysis of the possibilities and limits of audiovisual artistic practice especially as it pertains to the global Black imaginary. This book is a welcomed intervention that affords black popular culture and Kahlil Joseph the focused and nuanced attention it so deserves. It must also be noted that just as Jackson commends Kahlil Joseph for his ability to disrupt elitist paradigms, Jackson's focused meditation on his oeuvre also situates black popular culture into disciplinary studies where it is often excluded. ■