18

Rolling to "A-Free-Ka"

Seeing and Hearing the Transmedia Screen Worlds of Kahlil Joseph's "Cheeba"

JOE JACKSON

Since 2010, Kahlil Joseph, an accomplished artist across a broad range of visual practices, has created a variety of short films, music videos, advertisements, and installations. His projects draw from manifestations of African cultures—developing ideas from Sierra Leonean literature, expanding interpretations of the Yoruba deity Oshun, quoting the Senegalese film master Djibril Diop Mambéty—while expressing the contemporary condition of the diaspora in a variety of contexts. His collaborators include the musicians Beyoncé, Kendrick Lamar, FKA Twigs, Flying Lotus, and Sampha as well as the fashion labels Vans and Kenzo and the telecommunications company 02, earning widespread praise across a variety of international audiences and globalized contexts. This chapter focuses on the screen text "Cheeba" (2010), one of Joseph's earliest works hitherto neglected by media scholarship. By examining

the transatlantic flows nuancing the aesthetics of "Cheeba" alongside the diasporic undercurrents that shape Los Angeles's overlapping film and music scenes, the chapter draws out the screen text's sophisticated relationships with the African continent, exploring how the project constructs in both audial and visual terms "A-Free-Ka," a fundamental concept underpinning the musical work of Joseph's collaborator Shafiq Husayn.

Negotiating the Smoke: Sights and Sounds of "A-Free-Ka" in "Cheeba"

"Cheeba," one of Joseph's earliest music videos, was described by a reviewer as feeling "like a short film, or a montage in a movie" for its abstract, cinematic style (Tewksbury 2010). The music video's song is the first single from multi-instrumentalist Shafiq Husayn's debut solo project *En' A-Free-Ka* (2009), featuring the soulful vocals of the singer-songwriter and producer Bilal. Husayn—one-third of Sa-Ra Creative Partners and a collaborator with the likes of Egyptian Lover, Afrika Bambaataa, and Erykah Badu—often works on psychedelic music projects shaped by belief in spirituality, diasporic relationships with continental Africa, and multilayered understandings of the self. In typical fashion he states that his album about "A-Free-Ka" is an attempt to articulate "freedom of the mind" in the form of a soundtrack, exploring the myriad ways in which "freedom is reflected in the music" (Husayn 2009). In the same way that "Cheeba" glides across genre boundaries by combining in polymorphous fashion Bilal's neo-soul singing with gentle funk sounds and soft echoes of bluesy horns, Joseph's smooth camera movements and fluid transitions link visual representations of an underground recording studio, unspecified spaces in France, and a roller-skating rink in Los Angeles.[1] The director's vision of "A-Free-Ka" is liberated from strict spatiotemporal boundaries and moves beyond the African continent, thus engendering gentle, contemplative sensations as means of conveying in audiovisual terms the fluidity and freeness (or "A-Free-Ness") of the song's heterogeneity as well as the screen text's negotiation of various media formats.

Joseph adopts subtle green filters and lighting during the screen text's roller-skating rink scenes, indirectly evoking hazy sensations connected to the psychoactive effects of *cheeba*, a transnational slang term for cannabis or marijuana, rooted in the Spanish word for "young goat" or "kid" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* 2019). Complex sensations of strangeness and dreaminess established by the green lens filter are thus accentuated by innocuous posers sedated in the smoking area and the romantic affection of sensual dancers

grinding together rink-side. By capturing such feelings through visual depictions of the dancing roller skaters partaking in dynamic recreational activities, "Cheeba" combines Husayn's mesmerizing singing with hallucinatory moving images to communicate feelings of lightness and detachment experienced while under the influence of a cannabinoid "high." The complex feelings of surrealness and time-warping spirituality engendered by Joseph's visuals are rooted in the percolating sounds of Husayn's song, which, in turn, subtly echo the tradition of enhanced spirituality communicated by Rastafarian Nyabinghi rhythms.[2] Margins of time and space, past and present, become interwoven and entangled through the music video's homage to the liberating qualities of the borderless, cheeba-saturated visualizations of "A-Free-Ka," forming a polymorphic "transmedia screen world" that likewise fluctuates at genre boundaries and spatiotemporal borders.

Since the marijuana plant spread from the vast fields of its native homes in Central Asia as a paste-like form in Ethiopian pottery and the travel bags of wandering Sufis in Egypt, the hallucinogenic properties of tetrahydrocannabinol have been extracted through smoking pipes and consuming edible formats for ritualistic, recreational, and medicinal purposes in various parts of the world (Clarke and Merlin 2013; Rubin 1976). Certain depictions of cheeba in American popular music cultures deviate from the spiritualistic and contemplative values of introspection associated with early usages of the plant, extracting childish humor from the degradation of one's quality of life as a result of cannabis overconsumption in a fashion similar to Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong's feature-length film *Up in Smoke* (1978) and Afroman's music video "Because I Got High" (2000). In contrast, the lyrics in "Cheeba" explore the ways in which a mysterious, nameless female figure permits "ancient routes to glory" in the present moment, establishing timeless flows between the mystical entity's origins and her present manifestations by emphasizing how "she sets [him] free" through a state of profundity as natural and awe-inspiring as "the sun and sea." Husayn's abstract lyrics may therefore refer to a variety of things: the Muse, a figure we briefly see protecting her son in the music video's earlier scenes; cheeba, the plant with the power to grant the roller skaters new dimensions of introspection and understanding, moving across African, American, and European territories in the same way that the Spanish term's original slang meaning for "young goat" traversed and transformed over national territories; or, indeed, music *writ large*, the sounds and styles from different generations and genres that uplift the jazz community and inspire Husayn's *En' A-Free-Ka* album.

In this nostalgic homage to the multitudinous local, regional, and global factors that shape Husayn's creative output and Los Angeles's contemporary

social configurations, Joseph imbues notions of globalization with solemn respect for past and future movements of Black families in the music video's establishing shots. Sampling *En' A-Free-Ka*'s multistylistic track "Le'Star" (2009) in the screen text's introductory moments, nostalgic accordion sounds and extracts of a French lamentation are set to black-and-white footage of a woman with a packed suitcase conveying her struggles to a tiny child. The young boy—a physical manifestation of Husayn's spiritual lineage, emblematizing members of the African diaspora from previous generations—stares innocently into his worried mother's eyes as she sighs: "La famille ava pas, / Je n'ai pas d'argent." By infusing the language of colonizers into both *En' A-Free-Ka*'s title and the parent's complaint, the backdrop of the locked door that frames the mother and child as she sorrowfully acknowledges absent family members symbolizes the restrictions, or closed opportunities, endured by the African diasporas during and after the height of imperialism, wherein family units are broken, loved ones separated from relatives, and close groups forced by circumstance to disperse and relocate to new, oftentimes alien, areas. However, after recognizing the severity of her plight, the mother continues to speak: "Mon pseudo-copain n'est pas la, / Alors je t'attends, / Viens me chercher." Embracing the possibility that a change in her fortunes is forthcoming as she softly utters this optimistic invitation, an airplane's underbelly soars overhead, gently shifting the diegetic, transmedia screen world of "Cheeba" away from the undisclosed Francophone setting by landing, instead, in contemporary Los Angeles.

Although the French word *en* hearkens back to the colonial language of past oppressors, in ancient Egyptian the word *ka* means "the ethereal shape of the man [representing] the personality as a kind of astral body . . . the idealised self" (Carus 1905, 420), thereby imbuing the linguistic construction of Husayn's album title *En' A-Free-Ka* with emphasis on the liberation of one's spirituality through discursive constructions of "Africa" and "A-Free-Ka" without denying the existence of imperialism's prevailing legacies. While the introductory scenes establish connections between "A-Free-Ka," Europe, and the United States in order to emphasize the forces of displacement that characterize the grand trajectories of the African diasporas' historical movements, the final words of hope at the understated climax of the mother's lament communicate her dignity and composure in the face of enforced familial dissolution, an unswayable desire to control her destiny in spite of the nefarious colonial frameworks conspiring to displace and disempower by closing significant doors on her innocent son's future.

Mimicking the fluidity with which Husayn's heterogeneous collage of sounds and musical styles fluctuates and flows, the depiction of Afrodiasporic

characters moving effortlessly between continents and epochs in "Cheeba" emphasizes the mother's focus on the liberating aspects of her situation rather than the limitations imposed by the effects of colonialism's brutal structures. The components of "Cheeba" thus communicate the album's core concepts—the myriad formulations of freedom and liberation that may empower the geographic and indeed spiritual movements of the African diasporas—by articulating in audiovisual terms the smoothness with which Husayn's production skills effortlessly blend gentle, trembling brass instruments, serene keys and synthesizers, and hypnotic percussion sounds with Bilal's soulful vocals. Although Bilal's "neo-soul" comparisons place him in the company of the esteemed artists Erykah Badu and D'Angelo, his impassioned croons also echo James Brown's gospel-inspired soul music and the pining blues sound of Louis Armstrong, thereby propelling Husayn and Bilal's musical experimentations into exciting new territories through the music video's sonic labyrinths of contesting and competing styles and sounds. Indeed, Bilal's tender, trembling voice harmonizes with the song's smooth, soulful combinations of horns, electronic keys, and metronomic percussion in order to exemplify the "unabashedly sentimental" feelings of heartfelt emotion that came to define the very "soul" of soul music (Landau 1976, 210). The music video thus captures in visual terms the rupturing of one's sense of time and space while under soul music's mesmerizing spell, forming a montage of disparate locations and time frames to create the impression of a spaceless, timeless soul singer lost in the heat of the moment and the passion of the performance.

Diasporic Flows of LA's Jazz-Rap Fusion

Today, Los Angeles is experiencing a revival period for its jazz heritage through a fashioning of new music that draws from the city's widespread popularity of gangsta rap. Jazz music evolved in New Orleans from a three-stroke pattern known in Afro-Caribbean and Latino cultures as a tresillo (Peñalosa and Greenwood 2010; Sublette 2008); hip-hop emerged in New York through the popularity of Jamaican outdoor sound-system cultures (Brunson 2011); and both jazz *and* hip-hop were nuanced by the call-and-response patterns of slave songs from the plantations (DeVeaux 1991; Hamlet 2011). Joseph—through collaborations with a range of contemporary Los Angeleno jazz/hip-hop musicians, including Flying Lotus, Kendrick Lamar, Thundercat, and, the subject of this chapter, Shafiq Husayn—has thus produced interdisciplinary audiovisual projects that mirror the intergenerational and transatlantic energies of Los Angeles's contemporary jazz/hip-hop fusion scene. While the contemporary jazz

scene's divergent roots extend back to the prime years of Central Avenue when "all races and classes gathered in the clubs" there to listen to jazz and rhythm and blues (Isoardi 1998), the new fusion of musical legacies merges the city's heritage of inclusive, desegregated jazz with the militant, anti-institutional energy of West Coast rap, cultivating the countercultural properties of Black Atlantic music's roots by exploring the overlapping lineages between old and new jazz musicians *as well as* old and new hip-hop pioneers. The saxophonist Kamasi Washington, a key figure at the heart of Los Angeles's new fusion movement, observes: "We've now got a whole generation of jazz musicians who have been brought up with hip-hop. We've grown up alongside rappers and DJs, we've heard this music all our life. We are as fluent in J Dilla and Dr Dre as we are in Mingus and Coltrane" (cited by J. Lewis 2016). The countercultural elements of Los Angeles's gangsta rap movement are thus channeled into the jazz/hip hop sounds of the new scene, forming a series of sonic markers whose liminal statuses and polygenericism echo the double consciousness of African diasporas.

Joseph's music video for "Cheeba" features black-and-white vignettes of joyous dance moves in a recording studio at an improvised jamming session. The dancers wear "retro" suits and dresses reminiscent of socializers from a paradigmatic Central Avenue jazz club in downtown Los Angeles, thereby intensifying the retrospective, soul-meets-blues qualities of the music video's heterogeneous sound by communicating the musical diversity associated with the region's jazz music peak, when the area was a hedonistic space flouting both physical and sonic forms of segregation and separation. Oftentimes coupled with a gritty lens effect to create the impression of low-quality film stock's material decomposition, the worn, grainy texture of the recording studio's black-and-white footage compounds the retrospective, nostalgic styles of the enthralled participants' classic formal attire, transforming "Cheeba" into a pastiche of glamorous lounges, fizzing cocktails, and polished shoes plucked from the backdrop of a dizzying Langston Hughes or F. Scott Fitzgerald novel. The raucous energy of Central Avenue's community and its "nonstop, vibrant club scene" are thus channeled into the video's smoky underground studio as sweat drips from entranced band members' heads, wine and whiskey glasses clinking as dancers cool themselves with ornate fans (Isoardi 1998).

At the same time, the area's decline and eventual destruction in the Watts riot fires in 1965 are captured by the tone of reminiscence pervading the hazy black-and-white footage, communicating the complex, overlapping sensations of happiness *and* regret engendered by the recollection of Los Angeles's former vibrancy as a haven of Black jazz music. Joseph's music video here merges a series of America's most popular recreational activities into an unlikely dialogue,

juxtaposing recording studio scenes against footage of the modern multipurpose entertainment complex equipped with roller-skating rink and bowling alley, thereby channeling the liberty and swagger of the Roaring Twenties' social libertarianism and economic prosperity within a popular yet unglamorous venue from a section of present-day Los Angeles struggling to resist waves of inflated building prices.

At their peaks the Bloods claimed Compton's Skateland USA, and the Crips were associated with World on Wheels; thus, the setting of "Cheeba" possesses an undercurrent of territorial gang affiliations. Although "Cheeba" hints at the city's rap roots through the presence of a grainy low-fidelity hip-hop beat, Joseph's audiovisual depictions of suited, stylish dancers in an underground recording studio emphasize the history of Los Angeleno jazz music over the city's "gangsta rap" heritage. However, in the aftermath of the 1965 riots, the jazz clubs were disfigured or destroyed, leaving "decaying buildings and rubble-filled lots, some surrounded with chain-link fencing, [which] seemed to contain few secrets . . . a terribly aged outpost" (Isoardi 1998).

The gradual downturn of World on Wheels in its later years is implied by Joseph's framing of the recreational facility in relation to the ghostly memory of Central Avenue's once-thriving jazz scene, suggesting in a forlorn manner that a similarly problematic fate reminiscent of the jazz clubs' progressive transformation—and eventual decline—could likewise deprive the city of its iconic multipurpose rink. Indeed, the music video's merging of the city's forgotten jazz club legacies with its declining entertainment facilities proved an astute observation. Despite offering fifty-two years of service to the local community and even surviving the civil unrest of the 1992 Los Angeles riots "that left its neighbours burned out hulks," World on Wheels, the setting for "Cheeba," closed in 2013 after its owner, AMF Bowling Worldwide, filed for bankruptcy for the second time, citing "a cash crunch" as well as "[failure] to find a buyer for the business" (Griffin 2013).

Los Angeleno Rebels: Transcontinental Undercurrents of LA Filmmaking

The transatlantic flows of musical influences in "Cheeba" are mimicked by the film–music video hybridization's visual components. The main setting, Los Angeles, is of course the home of Hollywood, the central region of the city that became shorthand for the American film industry due to its national and, eventually, worldwide recognizability. However, a group of African American and African students who studied at UCLA's film school program between

the late 1960s and early 1990s felt troubled by the unrealistic and problematic representations of Black peoples' lives that were circulated by Hollywood's prevalent filmmaking cultures. Inspired by the rebellious, countercultural spirit of Los Angeleno civil protesting (the Watts Riots in 1965 and the Rodney King riots of 1992) that brought attention to law enforcement's violence toward African American citizens and the inhospitable living conditions for the city's Black communities, the UCLA graduates started to produce and direct a series of works that retaliated "against the form and content of the [Hollywood] tradition they were being taught" (Snead 1994, 117).

Although these artists were independent in the sense that they made their films based on individualized perspectives and singular artistic visions, their contributions to what contemporaneous LA Rebellion filmmaker Ben Caldwell describes as "emancipating the image" and decolonizing their filmic content demonstrate a shared preoccupation with representing and treating Black people and their communities' lives and concerns with levels of dignity, respect, and care that were otherwise absent in the works of their cinematic counterparts from Hollywood (cited in Field, Horak, and Stewart 2015, 1). As such, the group of LA-based filmmakers formed a type of pan-African solidarity that took inspiration from the anticolonial Third Cinema movement, originating in Latin America before moving into Africa through such filmmakers as Sarah Maldoror and Joaquim Lopes Barbosa as Angola, Mozambique, and many other nations struggled for liberation against imperial forces throughout the 1960s and 1970s, thereby capturing the transatlantic flows on which Black Atlantic (counter)cultural expression is grounded (Buchsbaum 2015).

This particular moment in Black independent filmmaking history has been retrospectively named the LA Rebellion for the ways in which filmmakers rejected conventionalized Hollywood filming and editing techniques in favor of a style of cinema that "set about *recoding* black skin on screen" (Snead 1994, 115; emphasis in original) through what was perceived as "the revolutionary act of humanizing Black people on screen" (Field, Horak, and Stewart 2015, 1). Charles Burnett, for example, independently directed, edited, and shot a feature-length drama called *Killer of Sheep* (1978). In drawing from the tradition of Senegalese cinema by reimagining the mask from Ousmane Sembène's *La noire de . . .* (1966) and referencing the moments of animal slaughter from Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* (1973), *Killer of Sheep* emphasized the transatlantic connections underpinning LA Rebellion filmmaking. Although in 1977 Burnett submitted an earlier version of the film to UCLA as part of the thesis project for his master of fine arts degree, Paul Dallas argues that the official release of *Killer of Sheep* to the public "heralded the emergence of a new Black

independent cinema in America" through its merging of music and moving images to create a neorealist portrayal of life for the family of an African American slaughterhouse worker (2017, 139).

In 2010, Joseph reenacted a scene from *Killer of Sheep* in his short film *Belhaven Meridian*. During the original scene, a determined, resilient wife confronts two gangsters who are attempting to recruit her husband for a violent task before remonstrating her partner on their porch for being tempted to use his "fists" rather than his "brains" to solve their financial issues. Alessandra Raengo and Lauren Cramer of Georgia State University's *liquid blackness* research group thus acknowledge that the spirits of experimentation *and* political awareness foregrounded by the filmmakers of the LA Rebellion shape and nuance Joseph's contemporary work, thereby bringing "film studies and film education, artistic space and praxis, popular culture, and the experimental and avant-garde into a fluid exchange" (2020, 139). While Joseph's direct reference to the doorstep scene from *Killer of Sheep* attempts to generate a filmic lineage between Burnett and his own work in 2010, a range of personal and professional relationships further emphasize the crossroads and crosscurrents across cultures and generations that link Joseph's contemporary projects to the LA Rebellion filmmaking movement. Haile Gerima, an Ethiopian filmmaker who earned a bachelor of arts degree and a master of fine arts degree from UCLA during the LA Rebellion period, trained Joseph's close friend and filmmaking collaborator Arthur Jafa (as well as their mutual friend, collaborator, and cinematographer Malik Sayeed).

By introducing the works of UCLA Rebellion filmmakers Burnett and Julie Dash to his then-student Jafa—who, in turn, proceeded to mentor and collaborate with Joseph, as well as the Ghanaian-British filmmaker Jenn Nkiru—Gerima's tutelage exemplifies the intergenerational relationships that connect Joseph's new media works with many of the key independent filmmakers associated with the LA Rebellion. In turn, an explicitly Afrodiasporic approach to forming diegetic transmedia screen worlds through the sophisticated amalgamation of sonic and visual frequencies gained a cohesive yet incomplete structure in the early 1990s through the theorizations of Joseph's close friend and collaborator Jafa.[3]

BVI Aesthetics and Beyond: Toward New Intercultural and Transmedia Vernaculars

Manthia Diawara argues that the LA Rebellion filmmakers "were using films in a very powerful manner . . . they had a Black aesthetic that one could compare to Black music—you know, the Blues, the vernacular" (cited in Diawara 2006, 10).

Indeed, Jafa poses the ambition to create a new style of cinema wherein "Black images vibrate in accordance with certain frequential values that exist in Black music" (1992, 254). He argues that classical Western music traditions emphasize the precision and clarity of specific tonalities dictated by a single commanding rhythm, whereas traditional African music heritages include a broader range of tonal formations coordinated by "polyrhythms" which sometimes possess as many as four rhythms at once. The uneven call-and-response bends and stretches of later Afrodiasporic musical forms—trembling blues bars, wobbling jazz notes—are indebted to the free-form, improvisational structures and energizing, communalizing functions central to continental African music and its associated rituals. The theorization of Black Visual Intonations, or a BVI mode of expression, thus attempts to bridge the gap between the sonic and the visual, between Black music and Black moving images, in a way that mimics "the tendency in Black music to 'worry the note'—to treat notes as indeterminate, inherently unstable sonic frequencies rather than the standard Western treatment of notes as fixed phenomena" (254). Jafa therefore strives to translate Afrocentric musical features in audiovisual terms, seeking aesthetic breakthroughs attached to the musical heritage of Afrodiasporic communities.

Jafa's manifesto is largely predicated on using the irregular speeds of a "nonmetronomic camera rate" to replicate musical rhythms (255). Jafa originally claims to have designed 372 "alignment patterns" or "fixed frame replication patterns" that might be used to create the visual equivalences of "samba beats, reggae beats, all kinds of things" (254), relying heavily on visual aspects of sound-image amalgamations at the expense of the sonic. While focusing on the possibilities of experimental editing structures, by his own admission Jafa's original hypotheses do not establish for certain whether visions for BVI aesthetics may successfully transition from "theoretical possibilities" into recognizable audiovisual features that manifest in artistic form (253). Jafa has not directly updated his original manifesto in twenty-seven years; thus, the practical guidelines behind his original theorizations are out of sync with his and Joseph's contemporary realizations of the BVI audiovisual aesthetic. However, "certain possibilities in Black cinema" (254) are starting to materialize through the ways in which Jafa's and Joseph's works form transmedia screen worlds by hybridizing film and music video formats.

Although irregular and improvisational editing techniques play important roles in Joseph's and Jafa's recent artworks, their manifestations of the BVI aesthetic do not rely exclusively on the visual aspects of the filmmaking process. Throughout their respective artworks, moving images shift and react

to certain musical moments of the accompanying soundtracks. The tempo and harmonic reverberations of a song's sonic frequencies drive the music *and* the filmic content of Joseph's and Jafa's audiovisual creations, uniting sounds and moving images in affective proximity as a complex yet cohesive whole.[4] For example, in Jafa's Underground Museum installation *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death* (2016), a barrage of moving images set to Kanye West's gospel-themed track "Ultralight Beam" (2016) jump between fleeting glimpses of Afrodiasporic cultures. The rise-and-fall or call and response pattern of the song is mimicked when sounds and conversations that correspond to the video montage's footage resonate at moments of solemn reflection and peaceful quietness within "Ultralight Beam," thereby avoiding clashes with West's singing and the heavenly cries of the celestial choir. Audial *and* visual elements of the installation herein combine to capture moments of the sincere and sophisticated mood emanating from West's track. Simultaneously, these combinations unlock new dimensions for the song, demonstrating the power of audiovisual hybridity when music is positioned in relation to a series of evocative moving images. Rather than wholly capturing the aesthetics of "Cheeba" in a fixed, concrete fashion, BVI theorizations instead offer promising starting points from which to explore and experiment with transcontinental combinations of music and moving images from "A-Free-Ka," transcultural Los Angeles, and beyond.

Conclusion(s): "A-Free-Ka" and the Audiovisual

By discussing an underexamined screen text created at the beginning of the artist's career, this chapter argues that Joseph's "Cheeba" challenges simplistic definitions of media forms by oscillating at films' and music videos' distinguishable media or "screen world" borders. In turn, these interdisciplinary, transcontinental aesthetics create transmedia screen worlds, articulating cultural convergence as elements of the Global North and Global South overlap and interact. "A-Free-Ka," the key concept behind Shafiq Husyan's debut studio album *En' A-Free-Ka*, is marketed indirectly through the amalgamation of neo-soul crooning, repetitive Rastafarian Nyabinghi drumbeats, and hallucinogenic movements between provincial France and the busy heart of Los Angeles in the music video. Black visual intonations, meanwhile, fluctuate across the boundaries of film and music video, oscillating between African cultural contexts and contemporary American locations. The complexities of overlapping sonic and visual jazz, soul, and Rastafarian influences in "Cheeba" echo how significations associated with notions of "Africa" and

"African diaspora" may freely transform from subject to subject, person to person, generating intricate networks of meaning and (mis)understanding. The emphasis on plurality within the intersecting crossroads of cultural markers in "Cheeba" challenges any interpretations that are totalizing or singular, counteracting the threat of racial essentialism's (pseudo)scientific grounds by reenergizing the semantic freedom of the terms *A-Free-Ka* and *A-Free-Kan diaspora* as their meanings continuously shift and constantly fluctuate in different settings and situations.

Joseph's transmedia aesthetics—oscillating somewhere between audiovisual representations of "A-Free-Ka" and Jafa's Black Visual Intonations—operate in tandem with Husayn's music-writing abilities and Bilal's captivating vocal deliveries, generating polymorphous diegetic transmedia screen worlds wherein conventional boundaries of time and space are ruptured and, instead, new possibilities and configurations are formed through music, sound, and moving images. A collaborative working environment or synergetic transmedia screen world likewise emerges in the nondiegetic or "real" space beyond the fictional realms of "Cheeba." According to Jafa, Black Visual Intonations—the combined phonic and visual materialization of Afrodiasporic music, the audiovisual encapsulation of "Black voices" in both musical *and* discursive senses—are exemplified by oscillating, oftentimes uneven combinations of sound, music, and moving images. Mimicking paradoxical sensations of the simultaneous liminality and fixity of Afrodiasporic positionalities within our contemporary networked environment, Joseph's "Cheeba" epitomizes a pioneering contemporary form of audiovisual artistry that draws from the polyrhythmic and multitonal roots of continental African music to "audio-visualize" and thereby communicate sophisticated sensations and feelings associated with the African diaspora's experiential dynamics and the navigation of concurrent cross-cultural affiliations.

Since the original notions of Black visual intonations were theorized by his friend and collaborator Arthur Jafa, it seems fitting that Joseph's multifaceted diegetic *and* nondiegetic transmedia screen worlds are based on precepts of collaboration. Although Joseph is assigned as the director for "Cheeba," the project frequently channels and foregrounds the talents and artistic personas of his colleagues Shafiq Husayn and Bilal Oliver, exemplifying how future waves of artists may work together effectively when shifting across visual *and* audial modes of communication. The collaborative constructions of interdisciplinary, transcontinental screen worlds in "Cheeba" thus offer fruitful avenues for new generations of filmmakers, musicians, and beyond. By subverting rigid compartmentalizations for audiovisual expression while, at the same time,

challenging strict, reductive systemizations of humanity's cultural flows, such artistic developments enhance our understandings of the cultural pluralism underpinning Afrodiasporic screen cultures across the globe. Contemporary formations of "A-Free-Ka" and its transmedia screen worlds therefore present fresh opportunities to broaden our outlooks, helping us decolonize the mind as we see *and* hear the ways Africa's diaspora shapes and nuances contexts and settings beyond the African continent.

NOTES

A portion of this chapter initially appeared in *Kahlil Joseph and the Audiovisual Atlantic: Music, Modernity, Transmedia art* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), part of the New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media book series edited by Holly Rogers, Lisa Perrott, and Carol Vernallis. Republication here is courtesy of Bloomsbury Academic US, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc.

1 Bilal's captivating vocal delivery has resulted in certain commentators categorizing his style within the framework of "neo-soul," which, broadly defined, marks the amalgamation of R&B and hip-hop with aesthetic attributes extracted from soul music of the seventies (Huff 2012; Okoth-Obbo 2017). However, the singer has repeatedly refuted rigid systemization of his singing technique, arguing that his classically trained falsetto merges and blurs genre boundaries, thereby extending beyond any fixed definitions.

2 The term *Nyabinghi* was originally adopted by a secretive anticolonial society in East Africa, rumored to have been led by the Ethiopian monarch Haile Selassie I (Edmonds 2003; Tafari 1980). Although the time and location of the first Nyabinghi Assembly organized by Rastafarians remain contested, it is vital to note that these congregation sessions celebrate important dates in the Rastafari calendar explicitly tied to the religion's African origins, such as the birth of Haile Selassie I or the anniversary of his first visit to Jamaica to commemorate African Liberation Day. A group of oftentimes unappointed or unelected organizers from the Rastafarian faith known as an Assembly of Elders dictate proceedings at Nyabinghi congregations, wherein cyclic, hypnotic drumbeat rhythms build walls of sound in tandem with traditional chants, heightening the spirituality of those in attendance (Barnett 2005; Kiyaga-Mulindwa 2005). Smoking cheeba may form a key aspect of the religious ceremonies as elders encourage the discovery of one's "inner consciousness" through an altered state of perception (Edmonds 2012, 49). Thus the Rastafarian roots of Nyabinghi Afro-rhythms in "Cheeba" are visually represented through the green lens's subtle allusions to the cannabinoid "high" warping and reshaping the experiences of the roller skaters in present-day Los Angeles.

3 Arthur Jafa's work *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death* (2016) has been screened at Joseph's family business, the Underground Museum; and Joseph co-produced and partly shot Jafa's experimental "docu-poem" *Dreams Are Colder Than Death* (2014).

4 In numerous interviews, Jafa cites the influence of John Akomfrah's notion of "affective proximity." Echoing Sergei Eisenstein's montage theory, Jafa describes "affective proximity" as the process "when two things come together . . . [an image] demanding to be emancipated from the context in which it found itself and placed next to where it was supposed to go" in order to generate a new effect (Jafa 2016). Akomfrah in turn states: "To begin to force many ways of being and living, I must work with the premises of the cinematic. . . . Organizing new spectacularity, new configurations, or what constitutes moving images—multiplicity, overlap, affective proximity, and subjectivity are very important" (Akomfrah and Canela 2018).