**Sounding Solidarity**

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*Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity*, by Tsitsi Ella Jaji. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 272 pages, $29.95 paperback, $99.00 hardcover. Reviewed by Petal K. Samuel.

Tsitsi Jaji’s elegant studyopens with an anecdote at once personal and emblematic: her interlinked memories of celebrations of Zimbabwe’s independence and the broadcasting of Bob Marley’s “Buffalo Soldier” on the radio. By examining such instances of black diasporic music’s circulation in continental Africa, *Africa* *in Stereo* demonstrates the role of music as a site for exploring and enacting pan-African solidarity and the experience of being “modern” in Africa. A critical intervention into studies of the African diaspora, Jaji’s study joins a body of scholarship that troubles unidirectional conceptions of diaspora that occlude continental Africa from its ongoing currents of exchange. Indeed, Africa in Stereo draws from a wide range of sources—including film, poetry, hymnbooks, magazines, ads, and other media—in order to demonstrate the breadth and vibrancy of U.S. African American music’s diverse afterlives in African media. One of this study’s key interventions is its renewed attention to pan-Africanist discourse, in both formal and informal iterations, as “not simply a position, but a practice” (146) of solidarity that is a critical resource for facing the ever-extant legacies of racial capitalism and colonialism in today’s world. This monograph’s lessons are not simply operative in its content, but in its language and form. This review will thus hone in on only a few (of a wealth of) examples that might demonstrate the meticulously crafted, multi-layered synchronicity of Jaji’s work.

The study coins the term “stereomodernism” as an analytic for describing African cultural productions that use African-American music to signal their modernity, expressly by acknowledging (and indeed urging) a sense of solidarity around shared challenges faced by black subjects globally. Part of what we gain from embracing this hermeneutic is the disruption of latent understandings of the work of imagining solidarities occurring only on one end of the Atlantic, of diasporic subjects in the Americas reaching toward African cultural forms in order to innovate in spite of sustained assaults on black history and culture. Jaji’s work demonstrates emphatically that African writers, artists, and politicians were listening and reaching back, active participants in what Jaji calls an “Afromodern experience [that] is collaboratively, coevally, and continually forged” (4). Jaji’s terminology, with the choice of the term “stereo,” echoes and complicates this idea. As she describes, “stereo,” as a prefix, both energizes descriptions of the production of an effect of being surrounded (as in “stereophonic” sound) and connotes deceptive and dangerous endeavors of circumscription (as in “stereotyping” a group). As such, this term lends itself well to describing the act of promoting solidarity while heeding the attendant complications of such efforts. Jaji’s project is deliberately hopeful, but not utopian.

Both producing and listening to sound are equally critical and active exercises within stereomodernist practice. In a fascinating reading of South African novelist, musician, and polyglot Sol Plaatje’s translation and transcription work, Jaji emphasizes how Plaatje’s “good ear” enabled him to work as a powerful advocate for black South Africans, particularly in the wake of the Boer War and the Native Lands Act. Among Plaatje’s works, the chapter analyzes an unpublished manuscript entitled “The Essential Interpreter,” wherein, Jaji demonstrates, Plaatje highlights the importance of an attuned ear—attentive to subtle morphemes, inflections, and rhythms—to the court’s decisions. This analysis not only contributes a valuable text to our knowledge of Plaatje’s corpus, the chapter’s later discussions of Plaatje’s and W.E.B. DuBois’ riffs on each others’ writings and Plaatje’s work in phonetics stresses how active and careful listening can play a critical role in enabling pan-African solidarities. This chapter, as a whole, exemplifies how attention to sound and to the logics of music can lead us to a critical understanding of the way sound permeates the broader body of texts that scholars in the humanities and social sciences study. Thus, when Jaji issues her call to readers to “[c]ome, listen with me” (248) at the conclusion of the monograph, it is clear that this is, at least in part, a call to open ourselves to new multisensory methodologies for reading and understanding texts.

The modern listening subject as represented in African popular magazines and “new media forms” is also a subject of concern in Jaji’s fourth chapter, “What Women Want: Selling Hi-Fi in Consumer Magazines and Film”. One especially memorable reading from this chapter is of the *Telefunken* ads that were published in the black Francophone publication *Bingo* and featured “Raky,” a black woman persona who appears in the German manufacturer’s radio ads. This chapter is exemplary of this study’s thoroughgoing intervention into largely masculinist studies of the black Atlantic, of “diasporic internationalism” (17), and perhaps also of emerging scholarship on black sound, which has featured the formative work of scholars such as Alex Weheliye and Fred Moten. Jaji shifts the critical discourse by attending to the role of women in practices of listening and sounding that shape our conceptions of modernity. Furthermore, Jaji’s analysis of Raky crosses sensory registers; for example, the model’s posture, the prominence of her ear, and her tactile interactions with the radio’s dial all receive critical analysis. Indeed, as is Jaji’s pattern, her attention to sound extends to her close readings of the punctuation in the ad. In a stunning reading, she argues that the colon in the ad “introduce[s] a call-and-response structure implying that the brand aspired to a chorus of name recognition throughout the region” (141).

Perhaps one of the most compelling structural configurations of Jaji’s study appears in chapter five, “‘Soul to Soul’: Echolocating Histories of Slavery and Freedom from Ghana.” Here, the study examines the 1971 Soul to Soul concert, during which a number of African-American musicians traveled to Ghana to celebrate the country’s independence, alongside a number of later texts that reference the conference, what Jaji calls “echolocations” of the concert. The chapter itself alternates between analyses of the concert itself and of such “echolocations,” enacting the structure of an echo in the very form of the chapter. One of the most striking readings in the chapter is an analysis of Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang’s poem “An Air,” which reflects on Roberta Flack’s visit to Cape Coast Castle during her visit to Ghana for the concert. In a passing and too-quickly dismissed, but nonetheless excellent, reading of the poem, Jaji reflects on the correspondence between the number of lines in the poem and the “minimum number of meters a sound wave must travel…in order to be considered a true echo” (169). Jaji’s attention to sound is not merely the subject of the monograph’s content; it is integrated into the DNA of the book’s methodology and language.

*Africa in Stereo* is a text whose richness and urgency cannot be understated. Jaji’s work is exemplary of the power of literary scholarship, and of its ability to describe the occurrence of phenomena at any scale (whether through analyses of broad historical trends or of punctuation marks). This study introduces readers to new texts and refreshes old ones; coins new terminology and refreshes frameworks in which this study restores our faith. In a moment when black solidarities are newly complicated and undermined by both the increasing visibility of black figures in positions of power and the extraordinary and public denigration of black life, this monograph’s imaginative energies and ethical imperatives are desperately relevant. It is no mistake, then, that *Africa in Stereo* appeared on a list of “required reading” compiled by African-Americanist scholar Alex Weheliye published in *ClusterMag* and on radical historical digital platform *The Public Archive’s* annual“Radical Black Reading List” for summer 2014.[[1]](#footnote-1) This work has touched a wide contingent of scholars eager to participate in the making of a more just and humane world, and will be an invaluable resource for generations of scholars to come.

1. For the former, see Alex Weheliye, “Required Reading with Alex Weheliye: From Nicki Minaj to Stuart Hall,” *Cluster Mag*, issue 5 (2014): 11 – 12, <http://theclustermag.com/pdf/islands/pdf/hi-res/clusterMag_issue-5_islands.pdf>. For the latter, see “Radical Black Reading: Summer 2014,” *The Public Archive*, last modified July 22, 2014, http://thepublicarchive.com/?p=4142. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)