CHAPTER 9

Redemption Songs: Musical Moments in Joseph Gaï Ramaka's *Karmen Geï* (2001) and Flora Gomes's *Nha Fala* (2002)

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Overture

Ousmane Sembène, nicknamed the 'Father of African Cinema', famously likened the African filmmaker to the traditional storyteller *griot*, who plays musical instruments, sings, advises, critiques and narrates (Pfaff 2004: 40). To imbed cultural specifics in cinema as a means of modern-day storytelling, African filmmakers regularly feature traditional musical instruments and music. As Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell point out, the 'musical moment' in cinema functions as a 'point of disruption[…]to disturb the text through its unexpectedness or at times expressiveness' (2006: 4). Music's and musical numbers' potential to disrupt in African films also has its own paradoxically territorialising and at once deterritorialising effects in that they modernise culturally specific storytelling

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mechanisms while diversifying visual representations and pushing genre boundaries. They also allow the filmmaker to reflexively codify cinematic spaces not only to authenticate and heighten a particular film's characters and mise-en-scène, often breaking the dramatic illusion, but also to underscore larger themes as artistic and/or social commentary. The musical, among all mainstream film genres, benefits from its stable formal construct as a form of entertainment and artistic expression, while serving the above-mentioned purposes of a *griot*'s craft.

Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's notion of the 'refrain' as a theoretical departure, Amy Herzog analyses the different musical references, allusions and adaptations in a 'flexible text that has quite fixated themes and character traits' from the well-known story of Carmen (Herzog 2009: 73–75). Senegalese director Joseph Gaï Ramaka's 2001 *Karmen Geï* and Guinean-Bissau filmmaker Flora Gomes's 2002 *Nha Fala* are the first African musical films that dramatise these themes of rebellion, liberation, cultural identity and feminine empowerment through their 'musical moments' and foreground the musical component as an essential accompaniment to the modern *griot*'s storytelling instrument, the camera. They exemplify the intended fusion and alteration of Africa's traditional musical practices and Hollywood's musical genre conventions in demystifying and mobilising an Africa typically depicted and stereotyped in such colonial narratives as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or the *Indiana Jones* series.

Instead of comparing the two filmmakers' roles in their respective nations' cinematic traditions, this chapter examines these two films' 'musical moments' and what Phil Powrie calls the 'crystal-song' among these moments (Powrie 2017: 4–5), where the films' underlining themes of freedom and postcolonial identity are heightened and eventually solidified to magnify the protagonists' politicised self-agency, a most analysed character trait of the heroines (Powrie 2004; Prabhu 2012). The songs' transforming power, most evident in their sociopolitical implications, is also manifested in these moments, often staged according to similar aesthetic conventions of the musical genre. Using a term coined by Bob Marley, I call these crucial musical numbers 'redemption songs':

> Won't you help to sing
> These songs of freedom?
> 'Cause all I ever have
> Redemption songs…
> Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery
> None but ourselves can free our minds….

The protagonists' redemption does not necessarily refer to their literal escape from death in the end. On the contrary, they are redeemed, through their voice and song, from being enslaved in a narrative as well as sociopolitical context that subjugates them. Although both films are intentionally textualised with rampant death motifs, Marley's powerful lyrics nonetheless best describe the redemptive and resurrective nature of the protagonists' actions, which epitomise Africa's own continual struggles for economic and cultural liberation and self-determination, a desire not only of the protagonists but also of the filmmakers as storytellers, advocating for their people and communities. These themes repeatedly resurface in African films, but despite and also because of the opposite outcomes and tones of these two case narratives—one tragic and the other comic—their 'redemption songs' illustrate the paradoxical workings of musical practices in these films that can both be fixated and flexible, as argued by Herzog. That is, these song sequences provide consistency and somewhat predictable patterns in genre and textual analysis, but they can also subvert and destabilise the familiar and often expected regularity in their musical 'refrains' when adapted in culturally and rhythmically different contexts. Thus such toying with the musical genre's recognisable conventions further enables creativity and artistic license for staging song and dance in cinematic applications, while at the same time adhering to the *griot*'s efficacy advocated by Sembène in telling African stories. Ramaka's and Gomes's choice of the musical genre was clearly an innovative move to indigenise cinema within the Sembenian framework.

Act I: The *Griot*, Song and Cinema

Although the earliest descriptions of the *griot* by Arabs and Africans were sketchy and largely based on secondhand accounts, in his seminal work *Griots and Griottes*, Thomas A. Hale writes that according to a most common origin theory, the term *griot* came from the French *guiriot*, which first appeared in 1637 and refers to traditional storytellers or oral historians originated in West Africa.[1] Despite the many functions and roles *griots* and griottes have played, 'praise-singer' is by far the most obvious choice to designate their job description as it is the most 'audible manifestation of their profession'.[2] This audible aspect of their profession synthesises their verbal and musical arts that are indispensable in the roles they play in society.

To illustrate the inseparable nature of these two aspects of the *griot's/griotte*'s work, Hale relates a story about American linguist Charles Bird, who was researching Bamana syntax but was struck by the force of music in the words of a *jeli* (*griot* in the Mande region).

> I wanted language to analyze syntactically. The music was interfering a lot. […] I couldn't use the data. I asked him to come back without the instrument. This time he drummed on the table. He needed something to drive his language. That struck me—there was an organizing force in the language. (Hale 1998: 146)

Although not everything the *griot* does is accompanied by music, this instance demonstrates the close integration of music into the verbal art in the Mande oral culture. This influence has extended from Western Africa to world music (Hale 1998: 147–148), and is purposely foregrounded in *Karmen Geï* and *Nha Fala*.

Both *griots* and *griottes* share this attribute in their vocal performance despite the fact that musical instruments used by these cultural performers in their trade bear gender discrimination in practice and training traditionally. Nevertheless, due to the usage of the feminine version of the term, *griottes*, one can assume that female wordsmiths were active players of the profession in West Africa (Hale 1998: 16). However, Hale argues that traditional gender and class biases have rendered little information about the *griottes* to scholars and researchers. Only recently did more data appear about these marginalised verbal performers. In particular, Aïssata Sidikou's research on women singers has shed more light on their profession and training compared with their male counterparts. One basic difference between the two genders' training is their respective mobility or immobility, as men had greater opportunities to travel than women (Hale 1998: 217–243).[3]

This difference in physical mobility becomes a contesting theme of entrapment and liberation for both films' heroines to take on their own agency and travel freely between gender roles and geographical locations. Their songs offer the utopian affects, as argued by Richard Dyer, for both heroines to claim space and time:

> [Musical numbers are] a way of relating to the world that takes the claims of personal and community expression as an absolute right, a feeling to which a person has unquestionable, costless right, and which takes no heed

> of which persons are allowed to expand and which not, nor whose space and time (including nature's) can readily be encroached upon. (Dyer 2012: 31)

It is during these musical moments when their songs redeem their death, both literally and metaphorically, and when the heroines transcend their immediate diegetic time and space to become symbols of freedom and salvation from their present enslaving circumstances, rooted in the transatlantic slave trade since the sixteenth century.

By foregrounding West Africa's traditional storytelling craft found in *griottes*' words and song in a modern narrative medium, cinema, the filmmakers raise women's voices to vocalise their historically muted positions and treatment. Effectively, Africa's traditional orature serves as a 'strategic communal tool for non-literate societies in their consolidation and socialisation processes that can be used to both praise and criticise those in authority because of the flexible nature of its performance and interpretation' (Mphande 2003: 580). What Victor Turner sees in the functions of social dramas illustrates the *griotte*'s oral performance as a public practice for the society to return to normalcy or at least to recognise the splitting force in a given society after a crisis or trauma that it has previously experienced (Turner 1980: 149). Thus, the heroines' 'redemption songs' in both films serve to restore hope and reconcile the conflicts in the narrative and provide a utopian vision for an Africa that not only articulates but also controls her own voice, in the face of neo-colonialism and globalisation.

Act II: *Karmen Geï*

In 'Postcolonial Beaux' Stratagem: Singing and Dancing Back with Carmen' (2012), I highlight two cases in African cinema where the Carmen archetype is used to symbolise rebellion and counter-narrative against colonisation. One of them is *Karmen Geï*, the first African musical film of Senegal, that takes the story to the historic Gorée Island, indeed the appropriate setting for the film as a past centre of the Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth century. The storyline loosely follows French writer Prosper Mérimée's novella, later dramatised in Georges Bizet's opera. It depicts the love story between a free-spirited Karmen (Djeïnaba Diop Gaï) and a police corporal Lamine (Magaye Niang), who, frustrated by his inability to contain and possess Karmen and fumed by his jealousy at her flirtation with other men, kills Karmen in the end. Using

Karmen as a reflexive trope, the director was able to 'free' his African Carmen in a number of 'musical ways'. Firstly, he returns Mérimée's Western gaze at a gypsy protagonist through Karmen's relationship, initiated through a music-dance number, with another female character Angélique (Stephanie Biddle), whose character is associated with law and authority, white culture and Catholicism. Secondly, the original music rooted in the West-European classical operatic tradition is transformed into a local musical site of Senegal's traditional *sabar* drumming, David Murray's jazzy saxophone and Yandé Codou Sène's haunting songs—'Gaïnde Meïssa' (sung to the ocean) and 'Karmen Bukagnaman', which is accompanied by a host of *sabar* drummers at a concert near the end of the film when Karmen meets her death. Lastly, the traditional storyteller *griot*'s role is fused into several characters' oral performances, including Karmen's, to invoke history, memory and contemporary social commentary. In particular, Karmen's iterations of the 'Habanera' ('Love Is a Rebellious Bird') at various points of the narrative serve as the 'crystalising moments' according to Powrie, that reaffirm Karmen's fatefully untamable nature. Complementing the impassioned 'Habanera' is a melancholic song reminiscing childhood innocence and happiness. These songs reveal personal nostalgic desires as well as progressive political messages for Africa's future. During these moments, Karmen fulfils the ideals of the film's vision of a liberated Africa moving forward and free from economic and cultural slavery in a post-independence context. Historically cast as a doomed tragic figure, Karmen must struggle to free herself from a male gaze-centred narrative begun by Mérimée, then by Bizet and eventually through Ramaka's 'remake' in a hybridised medley of Third Cinema, song and music.

In a sense, this loose reworking of the original story in a new cultural and temporal framing intentionally challenges the notion and practice of adaptation and opens for new spaces to emerge. Herzog argues that the potentials of the Deleuzian cinematic refrain are in fact rarely realised in practice as refrains typically refer to a structural fixation of intervals for the lyrics and musical notes (Herzog 2009: 93). The cinematic refrain of such a well-known story in popular culture, with its own 'gross constituent [narrative] units', or *mythèmes* as Claude Lévi-Strauss terms them (1955: 432, 1958: 233, 1963: 207), is mingled and at times overlaps with musical numbers. In other words, these somewhat fixed narrative units based on Mérimée's novella, sometimes presented in songs by Karmen at various story points, preserve the basic structural authenticity of the

Carmen archetype. Inspired by a musical event in post-Katrina New Orleans, Ramaka commented on Carmen as a subject matter for his film: 'I […] welcomed the opportunity to revisit the character of Carmen and the social issues she evokes. The story of Carmen is intellectually rich and consistent. However, as many times as the story is told, you never get to the bottom of it' (Ramaka and Martin 2008: 34). The adaptation also allows the culturally and geographically diverse and yet specific applications of the refrains to operate as repetition with variations in the lyrics and the accompanying instruments in different narrative contexts. Consequently, the original Carmen narrative is reduced in this film to a minimal structure consistent with Mérimée's and Bizet's through the famed aria 'Habanera' and three recognisable, codified characters: Karmen and the two male love interests. Karmen's additional queer relationship with the jail warden Angélique redraws the narrative's territories that are time and place specific to twenty-first-century Senegal. Likewise, the local musicians' work and the *sabar*'s 'pulsing gyrations and rhythmic trickery/mastery' (Scott 2003/2004: 204), connect the re-territorialised narrative to its proper diegetic contemporary locale.

Freedom, as a theme and as a cinematic practice from traditional genre boundaries and the narrative arc, is established early in the film through Karmen's break from territorial constraints in gender as well as authority-community relations. The opening scene, a dance-musical, shows Karmen dancing to *sabar* and Murray's saxophone at the women's prison. The sound displays an odd discord yet fitting rhythm of the West African traditional instrument and contemporary jazz. Karmen moves erotically with the beats towards the camera and Angélique to seduce her, who succumbs to Karmen's allure. This same-sex attraction poses a major and essential turn from Mérimée's storyline, prefacing the women's chant later in prison, describing her as one who 'creates havocs':

> You attract men and you make women undo their robes…
> Be careful!
> Hide your women, hide your men.
> Karmen has come!

Karmen's extreme mobility is reiterated by other women and sets up a recurring trope for her to sing/talk and dance/walk freely throughout the narrative. Karmen's voice further publicises what she can do as she rhetorically chants to the other women: 'Where does it go (tossing a piece of clothing around)?' 'Wherever you like!', they chant back. The

women's celebratory vocal exchange also bridges the public (jail, guarded and watched by other police women and the beach outside the prison walls, where smugglers often congregate and sail out) and the private (prison cell, where Karmen and other incarcerated women occupy and socialise), as these spaces are clearly defined and divided by the bars and gates in the mise-en-scène. The fluidity of their voices contrasts strongly with these physical barriers in a series of cross-cuts between the women singing in crowded imprisonment and Angélique sitting alone on the beach. Their song and chants, like Karmen, travel freely and reach other 'audiences'—Angélique, the prison guards and the seemingly empty beach, intermittently lit up by the lighthouse. These unchained voices foretell Karmen's escape and remain steadily audible to the audience outside the diegesis during cinematic projections. Karmen's power strikes her audiences, in and outside the film, as disruptive and destructive. This deepened notion of freedom in the soundscape engenders a counterpoint against the visual confinement, which Karmen alone can transgress, and further foregrounds the function of song as a form of resistance.

Karmen's defiance of authority, a fixated trope through her vocal performance and often sustained by her physical prowess, also turns the narrative into a postcolonial allegory as she acts as a self-reflexive *griotte*, criticising social injustice at the marriage celebration of the commissioner's daughter, Majiguène (Aïssatou Diop), and Lamine. The recurring sabar as sound bridge punctuates Karmen's oratory that recounts slave history and connects the cinematic space with the extradiegesis by invoking 'Kumba Kastel's spirit' in her lyrics. By altering the role of a wedding performer, who normally sings praises and entertains, Karmen instead exposes the corruption of her society, positing a 'point of disruption' in the narrative flow (Conrich and Tincknell 2006: 4). In this speech-dance, staged like a musical number but resembling the traditional *taasu*—Wolof poetic chanting often accompanied by *sabar*—Karmen's body and unexpected vocal jabs synchronise with the rhythmic 'sabarism' (Scott 2004: 203–207; Prabhu 2012: 69, 72, 76, 78, 85). As the women's chants in the prison prophesy earlier, Karmen again mesmerises the groom and challenges the bride in an exuberant duel dance. This 'refrain' in turn allows Karmen to claim both space and time as well as personal and community expression (Dyer 2012: 31). As she commands the screen space and soundscape during this musical moment, Ramaka indigenises the musical genre with *sabar* and the *griotte*'s craft, while retaining the key structural functions of the genre's song and dance.

In framing Karmen as dissident and outlaw, Ramaka creates a dialectic between the visual and audio spaces for the refrain of dance/chant by staging these musical moments with Karmen in the foreground, surrounded by a diegetic audience, including different authority figures she attempts to subdue, typically filmed in deep-space composition with Karmen in focus. However, it is during her 'Love Is a Rebellious Bird' song, alone with Lamine, who is taking her to the police station, that the core message about her free spirit is crystalised. As in the previous prison scene, she commands full physical mobility, escapes at will and has complete control over the authorities. She occupies the centre of the territory wherever she goes and shifts the boundaries as she freely moves, re-territorialising the power struggle between her and each authority figure she faces. Her versatile mobility is contrasted with the stability of the 'Habanera' crystal-song moments in terms of their visual composition and ideological manifestation. A key Carmenesque musical refrain in the film, the 'Habanera' is adapted from Bizet's well-known aria, translated word for word into Wolof, signalling Ramaka's desire to 'confront the language issue' by reappropriating the heroine's voice through a nostalgic connection with a native tongue of Africa's precolonial culture (Ramaka and Martin 2008: 34). By recasting a West-European classic in transnational filmmaking, Ramaka pushes the genre's boundaries partly through indigenous Wolof music, dance and poetry to localise the cultural identity of the production.

Unlike the 'Habanera' in Bizet's opera, Karmen also sings this 'crystal-song' to other women in tender moments of nostalgia and reflection. After Angélique's funeral, Majiguène asks Karmen to 'give him back', to which Karmen sings in response: 'Love is a rebellious bird, and no one can tame it. If it doesn't feel right to him, it's really no use to call him'. During their previous encounter at the wedding duel, Karmen visibly dominates the screen. In this rare, relatively balanced and warm-coloured shot, however, the two women are both dressed in strikingly bright colours (Majiguène in royal blue and Karmen in her signature red) and share almost equal screen space. This dream-like visual quality suggests that the two female characters are engaged in a 'reconciliatory effort' despite the separation of the screen space by an unexplained stream of sand falling from above (Prabhu 2012: 72). While the rivalry between the women remains visible, the staging appears to be uncharacteristically tranquil and even peaceful. As one major function of the 'crystal-song' is to process emotions, this specific iteration of the 'Habanera' binds both

women in sisterhood in their shared desire for love and freedom and provokes a utopia-like affect in the viewer (Powrie 2017: 169, 237).

This poignant affect is intensified when Karmen, dressed in a black dress, sneaks into her mother's room during her sleep. She softly sings the 'crystal-song' refrain in her mother's ear. Ramaka staged this famous aria very differently from Bizet's. As analysed previously, Karmen sings it in the idealised scene with Majiguène, then to her mother. In Bizet's opera, it is sung in the first act after Carmen and other women exit the cigarette factory and enter a public square, where groups of soldiers are flirting with them. It is a seductive proclamation of Carmen in response to the men's question about when she will love them. Bizet's aria crystalises in public Carmen's identity as the object of desire in a male-centred narrative. However, Ramaka's Karmen reserves her desire to be free in private and gentle settings with women, while retaining the song's allegorical meaning for Karmen to symbolise Africa's postcolonial liberty. A gendered utopia emerges in these two moments, arranged as a musical refrain when the theme is crystalised for the heroine and for the audience. It is Karmen's self-affirmation, and she relates this awareness to the women that she loves and sympathises with. As a contrast to the transient and rebellious love that the lyrics of this 'crystal-song' denote, the imagery of a mother, in particular, provides emotional stability and foundation for one's life force at the personal level and connotes a natural bond with one's land, community and people (Ramaka and Martin 2008: 31).

In the end, what seems to be the foremost redeeming moment to Karmen comes when she and Samba, a father figure to her, reminisce about the past, a time when she was innocent, hopeful and happy. Dyer calls the formulaic, utopian nature of musical numbers 'discourses of happiness', according to Hollywood's musical conventions (Dyer 2012: 101). Although this nostalgic longing appears antithetical to the desire for a free and independent soul embodied in the 'crystal-song', as a political implication, what this nostalgia does for an African story is to ground the progressive utopian image in the nurturing indigenous culture that can help forge a new hybridised post-independence life, as Ramaka envisioned in an interview (Ramaka and Martin 2008: 32–34). The narrative is structured with 'problems or tensions to which the numbers offer solutions, or at any rate, respite: the numbers constitute definitions of happiness' (Dyer 2012: 101). In a tragic narrative where the musical form as a film genre does not seem like a natural fit, this song sequence certainly meets

the criteria Dyer theorises. In this sentimental musical moment, Karmen, dressed in an elegant dark long dress with white stripes and sitting in the foreground with her back to the camera, gently pleads with Samba: 'Tell it to me again'. In the mise-en-scène soft-lit by candles and kerosene lamps, Samba lovingly recalls: 'It was 15 years ago. A woman, a young woman, as beautiful as the moon!' Karmen continues: 'And to whom you have to give back the will to be happy…'. She asks him to sing 'that song', and as she begins to hum the tune, Samba and Karmen perform the duet, in Wolof:

> Samba: The day begins. The child leaps off, and then goes off.
> Child, where are you going?
> Karmen: Mother, I'm going to see where the sun is. Because if it shines, we'll all be happy. Child, tell me where it is. Tell me that all will be well today. Or once again our hopes will be disappointed. [The two embrace.]

The recollection of the past connects both characters back to a time when happiness hinged on a child's innocent leaps and when hopes could be fulfilled by a simple faith in the sun to shine. The song serves as a temporal break from the diegetic present time, redeemed by the carefree optimism of a child in a song-dialogue with her mother, a relationship typically represented by the use of her native tongue Wolof.

Despite the circumstantial nature of such happiness, this song's optimism depends on a constant, faithful condition like the love of her mother—'if it [the sun] shines'—as one knows that the sun will always shine. This assurance irradiates a redeeming quality of the natural world that provides a nurturing and utopian condition necessary to obtain happiness. This song literally offers such a discourse of happiness, as Dyer argues, and a nostalgic 'vision of life that has its source in Africa' (Ramaka and Martin 2008: 25), as a sustaining force that inspired the filmmaker to pursue cinema as a means of storytelling. However, for Ramaka to stay true to the Carmenesque mythemes yet fitting to Wolof culture, Karmen's death must be ritualised. And for Karmen's character to be conceived as 'monumental' (Prabhu 2012: 75, 85), and ultimately subversive in a traditionally gendered narrative, she sings the 'crystal-song' while facing her own death in the flies above the stage during Yandé Codou Sène's concert, to return the subjugating male gaze back at Lamine. Staged as a tense, cross-cut double song sequence and accompanied by *sabar* drummers, Sène sings 'Karmen Bukagnaman' praising the heroine as Karmen

sings the 'Habanera' at this critical 'moment of illumination' (Powrie 2017: 172), reminding Lamine that he cannot own her, and exercises her agency to choose death to truly be liberated and redeemed from any form of domination. Used as a sound bridge, Sène's song becomes non-diegetic in the final scene, underscoring Karmen's destiny and redemption as Samba buries her.

Interlude: From Death to Resurrection

Karmen's musical moments serve two different yet closely related purposes. They operate both at the personal level for her and at the collective level as a national allegory outside the diegesis. Her 'Habanera' crystal-song transcends the conventional aesthetic affects of musical numbers. Ramaka imbedded in it also a utopian vision for Senegal and Africa going forward to reconcile with the effects of colonialism and globalisation, drawing strengths from indigenous languages and cultures (Ramaka and Martin 2008: 24–34), as shown in the choice of Wolof songs. As self-affirmation, the 'Habanera' sings of a posthumously liberated Carmen and an extradiegetic reality envisioned by the *griot*-filmmaker, who turns the musical moments into sites of political enunciation and imagination. Together with the nostalgic song, Ramaka composed a 'counter-musical' so to speak, a tragic yet 'something better' of a redeeming nature because Karmen escapes the mental slavery as a causal agent and remains free in and through her death.

Karmen's song/dance sequences were live singing recorded on set, taking after African orature and resulting in a more organic integration into the narrative (Maasilta 2007: 168, 170, 239). On the other hand, *Nha Fala* is structurally simpler with musical moments largely following Hollywood's musical genre conventions by relying on non-continuity editing and postproduction dubbing with a non-diegetic score to create a fantasy look and to accommodate the frequent and longer, choreographed song sequences. While Karmen's redemption is manifested in her longing for childhood innocence and self-will but eventually through death during the musical moments, the hopeful return of *Nha Fala*'s heroine from France conversely brings about the resurrection of her life force through song and dance. Thematically, the musical moments throughout both films exhibit various integral temporal mythemes (such as love, liberty, longing, fear, courage), where such emotional expressions are amplified. They all display similar centrifugal effects, bringing together 'moments

of time […] to create the intense light of affect' through music and song (Powrie 2017: 239). The two films also emerged as a transition in African films from Sembènian Third Cinema's response to Western narrative cinema's aesthetics since the 1960s to adapting the musical genre as a restructured resistance to Hollywood's cultural neo-colonialism. Karmen reflects Ramaka's anticolonial position by experimenting with the musical genre, while Gomes runs with the genre's formula and turns it into an idealistic carnival of resurrection that unites all the ethnic groups of the nation (Nafafé 2013: 46), as something 'that can be imagined and maybe realised' (Dyer 1985: 222).

Act III: *Nha Fala* (*My Voice*)

Flora Gomes' first musical comedy-satire is set in an African town where a girl, Vita (Fatou N'Diaye), sings the theme of life and rejuvenation through her long-buried voice. Vita's initial silence stems from a family curse: she will die if she sings. However, the heroine's symbolic transgression brings life, instead of death, as her rebellious singing becomes a redeeming act of resurrection to circumvent colonialism that has muted Africa's past. Co-produced by France, Portugal and Luxembourg and aptly titled to mean '*My Voice*', *Nha Fala* presents the life force that its own tradition underestimated, to surpass the suppression and resurface, free from its bondage. A dedication 'in memory of Amílcar Cabral, father of the independence of Guinea-Bissau and of the Cape Verde Islands, assassinated in 1973', opens the film and signals that Vita's redemption songs would serve as a parable for the black man's soul to return to its proper free place. Gomes spoke of the aim of the film:

> This is my take on the future for a new generation […] Whenever Africa is spoken about or depicted, it is always in terms of the aid we receive, war, people dying of starvation, sick people […] I wanted people to see our Africa, the Africa of my dreams, the Africa that I love [...] It is a happy Africa, where people dance, where people can speak freely. That is why I made this film. (AFAI 2010)

Made after a civil war in Guinea-Bissau that devastated the country, the film renders particularly a restorative vision and 'discourse of happiness' for his heroine to represent his home and even the continent as feminine,

resourceful, talented and happy. Treating these themes in such a carnivalesque yet ambivalent narrative with potentially chaotic mise-en-scène in crowd scenes, Gomes benefited from the musical format's relatively stable conventions and purposes to be a 'maximum disregard of space–time coordinates, with little or no attempt to construct, let alone reproduce, a coherent space–time continuum' (Dyer 2012: 16). The musical genre as entertainment fulfils this desire to offer an image of 'something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes—these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better […]' (Dyer 1985: 222). Like the setting of *Karmen Geï*, Guinea-Bissau, a small nation nestled between Senegal and Guinea in West Africa, also has its roots in the Mali Empire and is known as the Slave Coast that cajoles bitter memories of the trans-Atlantic slave trade—a past that Gomes hoped to use his film to overcome through song and dance.

The film opens with a subdued female voice humming a foreshadowing and recurring tune that accompanies the funeral procession for a dead parrot, carried on a stretcher by a group of school children. This image of death leads the audience into the open streets, where other death motifs occur, and serves as a structuring trope for the narrative: first, the death of the school pet parrot, followed by the neighbour Mr. Sonho's death and lastly the mock funeral staged by the protagonist. All these moments of death encounters are positioned to prepare for the resurrection of Vita's and her mother's buried voices. The opening funeral procession is followed by the film's first musical number set in a Catholic church, where choir members compete to vote for a new director. This is the first instance where we witness the 'silence/death' of Vita's voice. All members in the choir take turns singing why the others should vote for them. Vita is asked to judge the competition without opening her mouth to sing like the others. The refrain in this number is notoriously repetitive: 'You should vote for me because […]'. However, it shows a democratic process where all persons exercise their own voices to convince the others through song, a seemingly unlikely means for political persuasion. Nonetheless, this opening number sets the stage for a post-independence African state to realise the ideals of decolonising the past by giving voice to all qualified individuals from all professions and ethnicities. This refrain repositions Vita's community in a prescribed, commonly understood democratic framework choreographed as a 'social drama', a public performance's function theorised by Turner, to resolve the impasse of not having a choir director.

This hopeful vision of democracy is followed by the second musical number. It reminds the audience of France's continual cultural imperialism, which is paradoxically also a force of change and transformation. The song erupts as Vita bids farewell to a group of school children and her friends, who sing to advise her for her journey to France: 'The most important thing is to find a husband [in Paris]. If you marry there, you'll never be hungry again'. In exchange for their advice, Vita replies in defiance: 'I'll give you mine: build coffins. The only sure thing in this country is death'. This is the harshest political statement by the heroine thus far, although she avoids singing due to the family taboo. Yet she judges and comments like a *griotte* during the musical numbers. These pre-Paris 'tease numbers' contrast sharply with the heroine's later 'crystal-song'. Other characters look up to her, even acknowledging her silence: 'No one ever heard you sing. It's a mystery to me', to which Vita quietly utters '*nha fala*'. After participating in a couple of numbers without singing, Vita sees death again. Seen from a straight high angle down, Mr. Sonho's body lies in a marlin-shaped coffin, a constant reminder of her family taboo of singing. Before Vita leaves for France, her mother asks her to swear never to sing, and again she responds simply with '*nha fala*', followed by Sonho's funeral procession in the street as Vita departs for Paris. The loosely sequenced images of death, songs and her departure, however, invoke strong emotions about her 'dead' voice, a necessary plot anchor for the redemption to take place later.

Vita's transformation begins two-thirds through the film, after her boyfriend Pierre (Jean-Christophe Dollé) encourages her to sing the song he has written. Her 'crystal-song' performance reminds us of Agnès Varda's Cléo as she outpours herself and releases her suppressed voice during a spontaneous studio rehearsal in a highly melodramatic fashion. She picks up the music sheet, asking to 'keep only the commas and periods' and changing the rest of the lyrics. As non-diegetic music rises, she begins to sing in the style of a French pop song. Using double exposure of medium close-ups to frame her singing in the centre and place Pierre and the sound technician across the soundboard appearing on each side of her in the same frame and listening in awe, Gomes lets the music take over. In a montage sequence, 'the music takes flight', taking the viewer with the characters from the studio suddenly filled with the band members accompanying her singing, to the famous stairs of Montmartre, to the group celebrating at a restaurant, to the couple's bedroom, and finally back to the studio with Vita and Pierre holding a CD of the song recording and its

jacket. This 'crystal-song' is heard in its entirety, yet shifting from diegetic to non-diegetic as we 'fly with it' around the colonial metropolis Paris, drenched in the song's 'soaring emotion' (Powrie 2017: 3). This is her own song, titled 'La Peur' ('Fear'), which reflexively expresses her own journey of hiding her voice for fear of death. The lyrics are divided into two halves, like the film's plot: the first half depicts how fear devours and controls her world and voice, while the change (physically away from home) gives her the power to 'break stones and cross rivers' when fear flees. This utopian emancipation leads to the redemption song 'Dare!' for her to completely break free from the curse by staging her own death, a public drama in Turner's sense, and to resolve the paradox of death and resurrection in a crucial musical moment at the end of the film.

'To save her [Vita's mother] and me, I have to die. And to die well, I have to organise my funeral'. Vita's ingenious scheme, to be carried out in the final long yet colourfully choreographed number 'Dare!', reflects her agency to choose and act. Staging 'something [that…] can be imagined and maybe realised' (Dyer 1985: 222) is what Gomes does reflexively in this film because for the heroine/nation 'to be reborn', as Vita reasons, 'you have to accept to die'. This last death encounter would require her to lie in a pink coffin in the shape of a butterfly and be carried out into the street in a funerary procession. Gomes uses West African polyrhythmic drumming to commence the finale, connecting the diegesis back to the indigenous cultural roots. When the French musicians arrive, the whole town participates in this public drama, bidding her corpse (posed by one of Vita's friends) farewell and bursting into Guinea-Bissau's festive *gumbe* song and dance. Vita encourages her mother: 'You need to die with me to be reborn. Sing, mom, sing!', referencing the old superstition and fulfilling Gomes's political advocacy to liberate female voices:

> Vita: What you just do
> When someone blocks your path?
> Chorus (crowd): Dare!
> Vita: What must you do to move ahead?
> Chorus: Dare!

With the politically charged, catchy refrain 'Dare!' repeated, Cabral's bust is carried to the foreground surrounded by colourful coffins in the shape of animals and sea creatures while the camera cuts back and forth between Vita, her mother and the crowd. Once Vita's mother also begins to sing,

a jump cut breaks the spatial continuity to show Vita gleefully lying quite alive in the coffin and rising to sway her body joyfully, juxtaposing death and rebirth in the musical moment. The chorus's refrain continues, extending the diegetic space to Cabral's bust magically ascending by itself onto a pedestal, rightfully positioned to overlook the harbour as the gateway of the nation and thus concluding Vita's redemption song as well as the diegesis. Combining the resources at home and from abroad, this musical moment resolves the conflict between suppression and the agency to act through the dialectic death motifs in the mise-en-scène and the soundscape's jubilant resurrection.

Finale

Both Karmen's and Vita's goal is not only physical but also mental freedom, as Marley's lyrics emphasise. Mental slavery is the ultimate doom in the African people's continual struggles against colonisation. Herzog's analysis of the Deleuzian 'dissonant refrain' addresses the body movement (character's mobility) and metered rhythms as implication of racial politics (Herzog 2009: 93). Both of these aspects are foregrounded in Karmen's and Vita's character traits and integrated in their themed musical numbers. Their redemption is attained through thematically overcoming death, either by facing it with self-will or by conquering it only to live again. Both scenarios begin with their bodily mobility in song and dance to transgress boundaries, resulting in deterritorialising the pre-existing sociopolitical taboos and shifting the power dynamics by being rebellious 'trashy women' (Harrow 2013: 111), challenging authority or tradition. These key themes are all intensified during the accentually choreographed musical moments cinematically. Whether it is for Ramaka's post-Katrina New Orleans or modern-day Senegal (Ramaka and Martin 2008: 34), or to reflect Gomes's non-essentialist, ambivalent view towards the post-independence identity of Guinea-Bissau (Ferreira 2016: 234), the heroines' bodily freedom allows them to fearlessly sing of their ideological stand and project a hopeful vision to be emancipated from past centuries of enslaving practices and narratives in world politics today.

Their redemption songs provide utopian moments to temporarily suspend the diegetic time and space, to engage the characters liberally in circumstances which would bring them and the audience to a flight of 'soaring emotion or searing insight' (Powrie 2017: 3), consistent with the genre's convention that combines different forms of expression:

> J'ai voulu porter le regard sur celle de ces notions qui paraît la plus futile: la voix, le chant, cette parole mélangée à la musique, à la fois forme et message, qui a toujours été pour moi un des signes de la liberté. [I wanted to explore one of these notions that seems most futile: the voice, the song, this lyric mixed with the music, form and message at once, which for me has always been one of the signs of freedom.] (Gomes 2002)

Both Ramaka and Gomes used the musical genre to interrogate the formal boundaries set by fiction cinemas, which are often used for 'serious' subject matters, and reflexively imbedded in their films the very questions about freedom of creativity and black politics in cinemas by African directors. The mixed styles of song and dance in both films display such freedom for the filmmakers to traverse between regional musical traditions and practices and engage indigenous influences and global music trends. The intertextual nature of the Carmen adaptation and the ever presence of Cabral in *Nha Fala* also grant artistic license for indigenisation, while at the same time providing the necessary structural refrains for the narrative arcs to integrate with the songs' idealistic workings albeit in their own local settings, culminating in musical moments that solidify the intellectual concepts for the African audience to 'dare!' and 'to grasp the reality and act' (Ramaka and Martin 2008: 24). These are their redemption songs and songs of freedom.

Notes

1. Earlier accounts were also found in a book by the Arab author Al-Bakri as early as 1068 (Hale 1998: 8, 73).
2. See Hale's first chapter for an array of the roles griots and griottes have played historically (Hale 1998: 18–58).
3. See also Sidikou and Hale (2012).

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Karmen Geï, 2001. Joseph Gaï Ramaka, Senegal, France, Canada.
Nha Fala, 2002. Flora Gomes, Portugal: France, Luxembourg.

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