The Singing Voice in Contemporary Cinema

Published by Equinox Publishing Ltd.

UK: Office 415, The Workstation, 15 Paternoster Row, Sheffield, South Yorkshire S1 2BX
USA: ISD, 70 Enterprise Drive, Bristol, CT 06010

www.equinoxpub.com

First published 2020

Diane Hughes, Mark Evans and contributors 2020.

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Hughes, Diane, (Music teacher) editor. | Evans, Mark, 1973- editor.
Title: The singing voice in contemporary cinema / edited by Diane Hughes and Mark Evans.
Description: Bristol : Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2020. | Series: Genre, music and sound | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "This volume focuses on the singing voice in contemporary cinema from 1945 to the present day, and rather than being restricted to one particular genre, considers how the singing voice has helped define and/or confuse genre classification"-- Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020019348 (print) | LCCN 2020019349 (ebook) | ISBN 9781781794456 (hardback) | ISBN 9781781791127 (paperback) | ISBN 9781781797389 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Motion picture music--History and criticism. | Singing in motion pictures.
Classification: LCC ML2075 .S625 2020 (print) | LCC ML2075 (ebook) | DDC 781.5/42--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020019348
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020019349

ISBN: 978 1 78179 445 6 (hardback)
978 1 78179 112 7 (paperback)
978 1 78179 738 9 (ePDF)

Typeset by CA Typesetting Ltd.

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4 Singing a Life in Bondage:

Black Vocality and Subjectivity in 12 Years a Slave

Gianpaolo Chiriacò

Since its release in October 2013, *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen) has been celebrated as "easily the greatest feature film ever made about American slavery" (Debdy, 2013: 108), the one that "finally makes it impossible for American cinema to continue to sell the ugly lies it's been hawking for more than a century" (Dargis, 2013: 1). A few contrary voices have also been raised. Among them, Ruby Rich defined the film as just "Steve McQueen's newest saga of abjection" (Rich, 2013: 68), and Armond White wrote that "depicting slavery as a horror show, McQueen has made the most unpleasant American movie since William Friedkin's 1973 *The Exorcist*" (2013).[1] For the public and most of the critics alike, though, the violence in the movie is key to a poignant description of the struggle of a freeman kidnapped and brought as a slave to Louisiana in 1841.

In the so-called post-racial era, Angelita Reyes argued, "the extraordinary access to documents and information highways... enables discoveries of unknown, under-reported or once hidden narratives arising out of a monumental event – slavery" (Reyes, 2012: 165). In an interview with Henry Louis Gates Jr, McQueen stated that the movie is a product of its particular era, pinpointing the influence that the presidency of Barack Obama had on the rise of a new scenario.[2] The director is adamant, though, that his film is not about race. "I wanted to tell a story about slavery", he states; "this film is about Solomon Northup and how he survived... I hope it goes beyond race".[3] If a theme of a movie is its "common denominator" (Bandirali and Terrone, 2009: 32), then can we consider McQueen's angle as appropriate? His movie is about survival, or more precisely about strategies to survive within the context of a dehumanization based on race.

I will explore the role of the singing voice in these strategies, and in the narrative of Solomon Northup as presented by the movie. At its simplest level, the singing voice in *12 Years a Slave* signifies a distinct slave culture, with its practices and its meanings. Solomon, being a freeman from his birth, separates himself from it, but eventually embraces that culture as part of his strategy to survive. Also, McQueen, identifying the singing voice with slave culture, positions the black vocality, a distinct way of using the voice that can be considered African-

American,[4] in its original birthplace, in its original soundscape. By doing so, he instils into the American collective memory a culturally meaningful portrait of where that vocality originates, and of where it belongs.[5] This, one can argue, is a move into a dialogue about race. Many have highlighted the fact that only an international not-only-American cast, directed by a British moviemaker, could have made such an extremely merciless description of American slavery, with its perversion and its brutality.[6] I do not support this thesis. But I want to suggest that it is indeed meaningful that the cast of *12 Years a Slave* represents a sample of black Atlantic identities, as the conversation around slavery, and therefore about race, needs to be internationalized.[7]

The texts that I deal with in this chapter employ a racially offensive and abusive language, as part of a portrait of the brutal system of slavery in the plantation South. In the spirit of bearing witness that animates McQueen's cinematic production, and in compliance with scholarly accuracy, I kept such language as it is, although I am aware that my quotations may be offensive to some readers, to whom I apologize.

Commenting on Solomon's uncommon situation, the sound in the movie has been polarized in three ways. First, we find the opposition between silence and vocalization; then a dichotomy between his violin playing and singing; and finally, the sharp contrast regarding the two diegetic songs of the movie – 'Run Nigger Run' and 'Roll Jordan Roll'. These three oppositions signify on the main polarities of the plot:[8] slavery versus freedom; Solomon's performing practice in a white environment as opposed to expressions of an original slave culture; and finally the black/white racial distinctions, and the different cultural contexts that emerged from them. In addition, the singing voice provides a path into the psychology of characters. It articulates hopes and frustrations related to the main character's socio-geographical environment. Through a comparison of 'Roll Jordan Roll', interpreted by Solomon and the choir, to another scene filmed by McQueen in which the singing voice is central – Carey Mulligan's rendition of 'New York, New York' (John Kander and Fred Ebb, 1977) in *Shame* (Steve McQueen, 2011) – it is possible to underline one of McQueen's stylistic features, based on a particular use of voice. In conclusion, while relating the movie and the book, I will underline how a specific mythology of black voice and black vocal attitude is simultaneously confirmed and expanded in the movie.

The movie is inspired by the true story of Solomon Northup, written by himself and edited by David Wilson. Published the same year of his rescue, the book is part of the successful autobiographical genre of the slave narratives, made of personal accounts of individuals who had endured slavery. By telling direct experiences of slavery from the point of view of people who escaped or became free, slave narratives dispensed first-hand descriptions of the brutality of slavery as a "peculiar institution" within the debate that was animating the public discourse

before the Emancipation Proclamation. They were not only factual representations of human exploitation; they were also a proof of the ability of ex-slaves to become literate, or at least eloquent. Both aspects made the slave narrative of the antebellum America a major tool of the abolitionist movement.

The plot of the movie follows the book's narrative closely, with one major difference: John Ridley's screenplay focuses more on personal struggles than on a description of the slave system (Berlin 2003). Solomon (Chiwetel Ejiofor), married and the father of three, is a free black violin player in upstate New York. He travels to Washington, DC for a job offer, where, instead of being employed, he is poisoned and put in chains. There, he is beaten and threatened by the slave-trader Burch (Christopher Berry). Rather than yielding to his initial instinct to fight, Solomon realizes that his first priority must be to survive. Transported to New Orleans under the new name Platt, he is sold to Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch), a religious man who appreciates his professional skills as well as his musical talent. The envy of Ford's oversee, Tibeats (Paul Dano), is exacerbated due to a disagreement. When Tibeats attempts to use his rawhide whip, Platt fights back, but is nearly lynched. As a result, Platt is then purchased by Epps (Michael Fassbender), a fierce slaveholder who employs violence and other tools of mental control. Epps is also engaged in a depraved relationship with Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o), a slave girl with whom he has fallen in love and whose body he subjugates through violence. Epps's jealous wife (Sarah Paulson) insists that Patsey be punished, and in one of the most appalling scenes, Platt is compelled to whip the young black woman under threats from a gun-wielding Epps. Bass (Brad Pitt), a carpenter from Canada, is the only white man in Platt's world who vilifies slavery, and it is to him that Platt finds the courage to tell his story. The letter that the Canadian sends to Saratoga brings Henry Northup, an influential white man and family friend of Solomon, to the plantation. Although Epps attempts to defend his property, Platt regains his freedom and, after a long hug with Patsey, walks to Henry's coach while the girl shouts his slave name as images of the plantation fade away. After his return to his native North, Solomon is reunited with his family. We learn that he eventually became a famous abolitionist and worked for the Underground Railroad.

Silence and Performance

The singing voices of the slaves are at the forefront from the very first scene of the movie, in which a group of slaves is singing a worksong. From then on, singing becomes a determining part in every scene of hands in the field, with a single exception that I will discuss later. Nevertheless, the narrative logic of the movie is based on silence. Solomon has to hide his origins as a free man and thus cannot speak about his original status. His silence becomes a crucial part of the movie, contrasting sharply with the musical expressions of the community of slaves. I

posit that this conflict significantly contributes to making *12 Years a Slave* a portrait of slavery as we can understand it today.

Although I agree with Zachary Price on the point that the risk of making the "silence for survival" central is to reify a white hegemony (Price, 2015), I argue, with Salamishah Tillet, that depicting Solomon as a "figure of submission and survival", McQueen created "a metaphor for post-civil rights African American identities" (Tillet, 2012: 45). This is what Tillet, studying "sites of slavery" in different artistic contexts, defined as "a move… that enables post-civil rights African Americans to stage the ultimate rhetorical coup, one in which they wrestle with and eventually recuperate the primordial site of black racial inequality – slavery – as the basis for a more racially democratic future" (2012: 18).

Narratives such as that written by Frederick Douglass well describe the necessity to learn how to read and write as a way to break the bonds of captivity and to voice "the will of human heart to speak its own mind".[9] The particular condition of Solomon is such that, even though he had earlier experienced the value of the right to speak, he must now adopt a strategy of contemptuous silence. But McQueen wants to show us how this strategy is constrained by the necessity to keep a memory alive. The movie shows us how Solomon must negotiate his silence and the singing expression of a common condition, which allows him to create relationships within the slave community.

Silence, indeed, plays a big part in the book, as well. And, as we will see later, it also creates a permanent contrast with vocalizations of sorrow. However, silence in the book is a calculated response by Solomon to his situation. It is, in Solomon's view, a necessity, the consequence of logical reasoning. He knows that speaking out means sacrificing his own life, or a descent into more brutal circles of hell. The mechanical banality of evil is even more apparent in the book, as this passage clarifies:

> I was almost on the point of disclosing fully to Ford the facts of my history. I am inclined now to the opinion it would have resulted in my benefit. This course was often considered, but through fear of its miscarriage, never put into execution, until eventually my transfer and his pecuniary embarrassments rendered it evidently unsafe. Afterwards, under other masters, unlike William Ford, I knew well enough the slightest knowledge of my real character would consign me at once to the remoter depths of Slavery. I was too costly a chattel to be lost, and was well aware that I would be taken farther on, into some by-place, over the Texan border, perhaps, and sold; that I would be disposed of as the thief disposes of his stolen horse, if my right to freedom was even whispered. So I resolved to lock the secret closely in my heart – never to utter one word or syllable as to who or what I was (Northup, 2013: 57–58).

In McQueen's imagination, though, silence appears as a signifying element by itself.[10] It is the centre between an unspeakable truth and the false certainty as the status of a slave in which Solomon finds himself. The adoption of his contemptuous silence is sufficient to survive, but it does not make him part of the slave community. He has to sing to join in. In other words, he has to perform as a slave to be part of a slave culture.[11] It is the performative act of singing out that allows Solomon to construct the identity of "free slave".[12]

Being based on an image of Solomon that a contemporary public can understand, the movie is nurtured by the fragile balance between his distance from slavery and the necessity of human relationships even in bondage. Those relationships, though, take him far away from his origins and his real status as a free man. That is exactly where Solomon's struggle lies. Such struggle is perfectly portrayed, through images and singing voices, in the moment when he finally accedes to the necessity to join the choral singing of 'Roll Jordan Roll'. His singing has all the characteristics of a fight, depicting his personal difficult acceptance of his position. He initially refuses to sing and does not join the choir in their response to the call of the leader (Topsy Chapman). But slowly he accepts it, he moves his eyes around, he whispers; and then his singing becomes a grunt, a liberation, an abandonment. While he sings, he can finally express his feelings. Through this act, Solomon confirms the idea of what a slave is supposed to be: there are limited ways by which a man in bondage can express himself in the plantation South – singing is one of them. That expression of feelings is, as McQueen shows in his movie, his performance of slavery: through singing, Solomon becomes Platt. However, at the end of the song, as we will see, Platt regains the right of being Solomon again.

The dialogue with Eliza (Adepero Oduye) illuminates another emblematic aspect of the contrast between silence as a strategy and vocal expressions. Eliza is a slave woman at Ford's plantation, who has been with Solomon since they were transported together from Maryland to Louisiana. Her two children had been taken away from her in New Orleans, and she could find no consolation. Solomon is tired of Eliza's constant moans, so he asks her to hush her weeping. This results in her accusing him of having forgotten, of having erased the memory of his own children. When he strongly denies this, she accuses him: "but you make no sounds". In this fundamental statement, Eliza affirms that Solomon's attempt is a dangerous one, as his silence will eventually extinguish his memory of a better time when he and his family were free and prosperous.

The role of sounds, songs or voices, as a way to preserve a memory and therefore protecting an identity, or even preserving the existence of an identity beyond slavery, is ubiquitous in literature about African-American music.[13] As Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr has written, "cultural forms such as tales, stories, and music (especially the *performative* aspects of such) function as reservoirs in which cultural memories reside" (Ramsey, 2003: 32–33; original emphasis). Eliza is asking to Sol-

omon/Platt to hold on to that memory, and to make some culturally meaningful noise to keep it, as a performance of black culture. When Solomon does sing, he finally makes his voice heard. The vocal performance of "reservoirs of cultural memories" in 'Roll Jordan Roll' becomes in fact his weapon in the battle for control and for agency.

Violin and Songs

Looking at McQueen's movie as a portrait of slavery and therefore of black culture in the plantation South, I would now turn my focus onto Solomon's experiences as violinist. This would shed light on another aspect related to people of African origins in 1850s America and establish other paths of analysis of the singing voice in the movie. Thanks to his practice as a professional musician, Solomon had travelled, he had visited several North American cities, and was acquainted with individuals of different classes and races. He had made himself a professional, entrepreneurial and creative man who could well interpret the socio-economic value of the dynamic and adventurous America of that time. He is a smart and ingenious individual, and these qualities, his dramatic capture and condition notwithstanding, are underlined throughout the movie. Despite McQueen's distancing the film from a discourse on race, the fact that it stresses the individual qualities of an exceptional freeman in antebellum America represents a significant difference from previous movies involving slavery. Even a film such as *Half Slave, Half Free* (Gordon Parks, 1984), based on the same book, is focused more on the collective experience of African Americans than on the subjectivity of the characters.[14]

Solomon plays violin in Louisiana, as well. He is called upon at the house of the trader Freeman (Paul Giamatti), where Solomon and other slaves are sold. He is requested to play to cover Eliza's cries when her children are taken away from her. He is also encouraged to play, in Epps's house at night, when the drunk master instructed his property to cheer up and move rhythmically. "Dance!" he shouts imperiously to his slaves, who have been wearied after an entire day in the field. Katrina Dionne Thompson argues that "the first form of American entertainment was the music, song, and dance performed by enslaved blacks for the amusement and under the coercion of whites on the Southern plantation" (Thompson, 2014: 7). Slaveholders like Epps "purposely crafted an atmosphere that induced blacks to perform... They purposely orchestrated performances on the plantation and made music and dance strategically organized aspects of plantation life" (Thompson, 2014: 80). Both Thompson and Abrahams (1993) explain how these performances were also fundamental moments in which African Americans developed strategies of resistance. It was within this context, moreover, that particularly skilled individuals – among them, musicians, singers or dancers – were able to affirm their role as cultural mediators in the plantation life.

Thompson's interpretation of race relations in the plantation South is a useful tool to understand how racial distinctions were showed in, and fundamental to, performances and performance strategies. Being able to continuously reshape the performances according to the audience was a crucial skill for black Americans. Subtle but meaningful differences in performance practices allowed blacks to gain tactical advantages while keeping vital secrets hidden from the white audience. However, here McQueen prefers to establish a sharper difference between the music played for the white audience and the music practice that is presented as quintessentially African American. If the former was enforced and included fiddle and dance, the latter was essentially sung. This substantiates the image of Solomon as an exceptional man, his subjectivity put on the forefront just like his musical skills. But at the same time, it enforces the notion that a performance of slavery gravitates around the singing voice.

The singing of the slave has often been interpreted as a more original expression, from the standpoint of white observers and from that of slave biographies as well. McQueen invites us to accept this view. The worksongs in the field, the humming of Patsey, and the song sung by the slaves for their fellow's funeral, are all part of an original slave culture that developed in the plantations, and subsequently rooted cultural productions that Americans of African origins created after slavery. Lawrence W. Levine (2007) and many other scholars after him explained how a specific culture and a specific consciousness can be traced from songs and other oral traditions. But here McQueen over-stresses the role of the singing voice as a medium. It is through vocal practices, in the humming, in the increasing excitement of the call-and-response, in the clapping, in the transformed and therefore expressive faces of singers, in resonating bodies, that the construction of "true communities of men" is relayed (Ong, 1967: 124).

The movie explained it with vivid force, suggesting that the presence of voice and of vocal performances erupts with a power that transcends the words. It is interesting to note that McQueen does not delve too specifically into the slave culture, as he is more concerned with showing the racial line of separation between the world of slaves and that of enslavers. Therefore, the singing voice, especially the act of collective singing, exemplifies the slave culture as a whole, even though it is not used to recount, for example, rituals such as the ring shout or storytelling of any sort. The essential presence of the singing voice in *12 Years a Slave* is what Michel Chion called, drawing from the psychoanalytic studies of Denis Vasse, "the vocal cord". It is a voice that "could imaginarily take up the role of an umbilical cord, as a nurturing connection, allowing no chance of autonomy to the subject trapped in its umbilical web" (Chion, 1999: 62). The image of the vocal cord is particularly effective as it reflects the extent to which that singing tradition keeps Platt alive. But it also keeps him trapped in a community to which he does not belong, but to which he depends on in order to survive. If, as said, the performa-

tive act of singing out allows Solomon to construct the identity of a "free slave", it is only by accepting the latter of the two elements – slavery – that he can get his freedom back. This is a tremendously complex relationship that McQueen so successfully describes.

Black and White Singers

The topic of a slave culture that developed through songs is explored in the movie along another axis that the singing voices signal. There are, in fact, two main non-original songs, sung during the scenes, in a diegetic pose. They might be considered classics. "'Run Nigger Run' and 'Roll Jordan Roll' are companion pieces", affirms journalist and critic Ann Powers (2013), and they both are included in the oldest, and still one of the most authoritative, collection of slave music, *Slave Songs of the United States* (Allen, Ware and McKim Garrison, 1867). The former is the first song that immediately positions us in the regime of forced labour and life. The white overseer Tibeats sings it before Solomon and other slaves, as to instil fear in their minds, to forge a scared spirit that must be maintained throughout their working hours. The choice is particularly appropriate, as the song refers to the patrollers, a militia whose task was to watch over slaves during the night, with the aim to stop any black person walking without a pass from his or her master. By singing about the patrollers, Tibeats is explaining very carefully, to the new slave Solomon and to us, what is risked by running away.

In 1925, Dorothy Scarborough described the origins of the song, reporting the words of Dr John A. Weith, a Southerner later based in New York.

> He said of *Run Nigger Run*, a famous slavery-time song, which I had heard my mother sing, that it is one of the oldest of the plantation songs. White people were always afraid of an insurrection among the Negroes, and so they had the rule that no Negro should be off his own plantation, especially at night, without a pass. They had patrols along the roads to catch truant Negroes, and the slaves called them *patter-rollers*. The darkies sang many amusing songs about the patrols and their experiences in eluding them (Scarborough, 1925: 23).

It is also appropriate that a white man is singing this song in the film. We know, in fact, that "'Run Nigger Run' became so popular that many white people sang it" (Fisher, 1953: 81). Moreover, in the context of the movie, the tune works perfectly both to explain the different roles of white males in the plantation system (the patriarchal master, the shabby overseer, the cruel patroller) and to create the fear that will reverberate throughout the movie.

Furthermore, in his iconic style, McQueen depicts – with the song – the strategy of slaveholders and overseers alike: they use a slave song to their own advantage, either for simple pleasure or to convey warnings and admonishments. Powers

describes efficiently how *12 Years a Slave* depicts the interactions of blacks and whites through music:

> among the many challenges this film poses to viewers, one is to understand how music has both supported the liberation and self-expression of African-Americans and filled an imaginary space of reconciliation and even joy, where oppressors can lie to themselves about the cruelty they inflict. Music culture in America has often defeated racism and, just as often, perpetuated it (Powers, 2013).

McQueen's Tibeats sounds like a professional vocalist. His singing is almost scientific. He requires the slaves to clap their hands, a simple task that catches their attention. He establishes fear, he transmits it through his voice, he sighs, he exhales. His voice becomes vicious and then ubiquitous, when the song turns extradiegetic. As the camera moves to Ford and his reading of the Bible in front of his slaves, we experience the "powers of the acousmêtre" (Chion, 1999: 23–24). The voice of the overseer spans all over the plantation, and even beyond that. It indicates a powerful tool of mental control. Ford's and Tibeats's voices also overlap, creating an additional intersection of meanings: fear, suppression, and a tactical use of religion.

On the other end of the axis there is 'Roll Jordan Roll'. This song embodies Solomon's subjective struggle. What is important here is to understand the song's role in the narrative. "The relation of songs to narrative in plays and films varies enormously... They may set a mood or else function as scene-setting... They may act as commentary or reflection on the action" (Dyer, 2012: 9). In this case, the song both sets a scene and provides a commentary. It introduces the internal practices of the community of captives. Also, through the opposition to Tibeats's song, it enforces the frame of that relationship between whites and blacks that is so central to the narrative. The two songs complement one another, just like the two races are part of the same slave society, although in completely different roles.

In the aforementioned *Slave Songs of the United States*, 'Roll Jordan Roll' appears as the first song.[15] Whereas 'Run Nigger Run' approximately respects the musical score presented in the book, 'Roll Jordan Roll' is performed in a different way, thanks to the arrangement of composer Nicholas Britell. The performance in the movie emphasizes call-and-response. It is a more sanctified version, therefore it sets the perfect background for Solomon's voice to eventually rise up.[16]

Sissy and Solomon

The scene in which Solomon finally joins the choir in 'Roll Jordan Roll' is extremely significant within the tale, but the song also plays a fundamental part in the more intimate exploration of subjectivities. Apparently, the use of singing voices in McQueen's movies requires scenes wherein the singing voice breaks in and literally stops the sequence of events. In his study of the uses of songs in film, Richard

Dyer states that a song functions as "an interruption, a change of pace, a pause for something different" (Dyer, 2012: 9). McQueen adopts these pauses in his works, as he regularly incorporates vocal tunes to truly investigate subjectivities. The version of 'Roll Jordan Roll' that we see in *12 Years a Slave* is stylistically similar to the rendition of 'New York, New York' that occupies an equivalent position in *Shame* (Steve McQueen, 2011). The main character's sister, Sissy (Carey Mulligan), is performing the song in a club, where Brandon (Michael Fassbender) and his boss (James Badge Dale) went to enjoy the show. The long close-up on Sissy overlapped with a close-up on the face of Brandon. His expression reveals that he is particularly moved by the song, in contrast to his boss, who participates as a mere observer.

Besides technical similarities, the two scenes have more things in common. Sissy and Solomon are both musicians, they both feel under-respected, they both move in an environment that forces them to adapt their ambitions – Solomon being kidnapped into slavery, Sissy looking for a career as a singer in the big city ("If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere"). They both sing about the socio-cultural environments in which they are impelled to live, exemplified by these specific songs. To Sissy, the song itself recalls the city, its geographical environment. In Solomon's case, 'Roll Jordan Roll', as seen, is one of the most symbolic slave songs, drawing upon the metaphors of baptism and of water as an element that brings liberation. In addition, the lyrics of the two songs suggest the image of a new birth, although one is material ("I'll make a brand new start of it") and one spiritual, as crossing the biblical Jordan leads to the promised land. Both of the scenes foster the use of metalinguistic traits: the breath, the whispering in *Shame*; the husky tones and the facial gestures of Ejiofor in *12 Years*. Yet, the close-up is very revealing – in the case of *12 Years a Slave*, it goes from Topsy Chapman who lines out the tune to the "ensemble", to Solomon's face. In *Shame*, it moves significantly from Sissy to Brandon ("top of the heap"), whose personal struggle – his sexual addiction and his perverted relationships – is embedded in his New Yorker lifestyle.

That the voice is central is also confirmed by the absence of musical accompaniment. In 'New York, New York' the piano – already quite minimal and angular – disappears in the most emphatic points. In 'Roll Jordan Roll', there is no accompaniment at all, and the close-up coincides with a lower volume of the choir. The fact that these two songs correspond to interruptions, and the fact that both Sissy and Solomon are two subjugated characters – the former being a female artist who has already tried to commit suicide; the latter being a slave, a property with no rights – signals that the singing voice here is functional to a "diegetic interiority" (Silverman, 1988: 71). It can be argued that in McQueen's aesthetic the singing voice, when it invades the visual scene through the mouths of main characters, illustrates their interior universes. In *12 Years a Slave*, by bringing the public into Solomon's subjectivity,[17] the director uses the tool of a diegetic singing voice as a sort of vocal voyeurism.

When Platt sings 'Roll Jordan Roll', at first we see Chapman's face. She starts to clap and sings the first stanza of the song. They are singing for the departure of the soul of a field hand who had died under the blasting sun. Once the leader introduces the song, the call-and-response, a fundamental element of the African-American musicality, comes to the forefront. We see the group of slaves, standing in front of the area where the dead companion has been buried, singing the song as a group. We also spot Patsey singing with a rare smile on her face – we are immediately reminded of the brief moment of calm happiness that she enjoyed while forming dolls from leaves and corn ears and humming a quiet tune. Then Platt becomes the centre of the scene.

The moments that follow are all about him. We see the inner contrast of his condition of "free slave" depicted through his surrender to the song. First, he strongly refuses, his eyes averted, his mouth closed, his hands along his hips. His determination, though, is not steady, as we see when the camera catches him. He starts moving his lips, still uncertain, still trying to tune up. As the choir increases its volume, Solomon looks around and introduces his voice timidly. He finally releases his voice completely. The focus is all on his lips and his eyes. He displays his teeth, opens his mouth more explicitly, closes his eyes, and lets his voice ring out, joining the choir of slaves. Toward the end of the scene, after several nods of his head, he is singing and he looks up, aiming at the sky, delivering his chant towards a higher level of justice. This fascination with the gestures and the slave body closely reflect the descriptions provided by colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson. His notorious reports about his black soldiers during the Civil War, some of them ex-slaves, show a similar fascination: "the glow reflected gorgeously from their red legs & not dimingly from their shining cheeks & white teeth and rolling eyes" (Higginson, 2000: 248). The perception of the body in the voice is brightly described by Roland Barthes in his popular article on the grain of the voice (Barthes, 1977). Here, we are invited to hear the body in the voice, as we can see Platt's facial movements and how he is using them to reject the sonic invitation, and to finally project his voice. He joins the choir but at the same time tries to reach the sky. He invokes a supreme level of justice.

By signifying a particular racial, ethnic and gendered identity through his voice, Platt is portraying his struggle to resist. By performing in a distinctive and individual black voice – with his harsh tone, the call-and-response, the use of his body – Platt is looking for a final form to express his resistance, notwithstanding his apparent acceptance of the condition of bondage. Using the words of Mike Sell, here

> the Black Voice – as scream, shout, signifyin' inversion, science-dropping soapbox crusade, Negro spiritual, tragic dramatic cry, street-echoing cackle, and a myriad of other vocal modes – is understood to be the crucial lever to unhinge the spiritual and material hegemony

> of whiteness… The Black voice, it was argued, would undermine to the point of collapse the most stubbornly institutionalized conceptual categories of Western thought (Sell, 2006: 278).[18]

In other words, performing vocally while in bondage does not confirm an acceptance of a slave system. It rather manifests the unbroken search for a safe space through the delivery of an uproarious vocal sound.

That Platt's signifying on that performance of black voice will finally result in his success is suggested by the fact that, once Platt has finally joined the choral performance, there is no more singing until the end of the movie. The echo of his singing voice anticipates his liberation. Even when we see again the hands in the field, at the beginning of the scene in which Platt is finally saved by Henry Northup, there are no vocal sounds, neither talking nor singing. Platt's narrative arch is eventually completed: a white man is coming to free a slave. This exceptional moment is signalled by the silence among the black crowd.

Black Utterances

I now want to focus my attention on the original story, the book published by Northup right after he returned to Saratoga. What is the role of singing in the book? Quite surprisingly, as prevalent as it is in the movie, the singing voice rarely appears in the book. There are just two occurrences of singing, and one is not presented as a personal memory of his time in slavery but rather as a more general account of tunes that were usually sung. The absence of singing is striking insofar as Northup himself is a musician, and it would be reasonable to expect a more substantial presence of songs. Even more interesting is that, at the same time that the book was published, a myth of the black singing voice was already well established.

Among the most popular descriptions of black singing was Frederick Douglass's poignant assertion that to understand slavery's violent reality one must hear the sound of slavery.[19] Young travellers and writers who were destined to be highly influential persons in late nineteenth-century America, such as Frederick Law Olmsted (1856, 1953) and Whitelaw Reid (1965), enriched their articles and books with many accounts of the powerful, exotic, sometimes "barbarous", but always enchanting, slave voices.

Shane White and Graham White have provided a stunning depiction of what slavery time may have sounded like. By consolidating the words of George Hepwort, a Union inspector in 1863 Louisiana, and Elizabeth Ross Hite, a former Louisiana slave, the two scholars provide a capturing presentation of vocal utterances: "the whole audience [after a service] swayed back and forward in their seats, and uttered in perfect harmony a sound like that caused by prolonging the letter *m* with the lips closed" (White and White, 2005: 101). Elizabeth echoed the descrip-

tion, clarifying the meaning: "you gotta shout and you gotta moan if you want to be saved" (102).

The movie relies on this enormous treasure of descriptions to replace the absence of singing in the book. The voices in 'Roll Jordan Roll', in worksongs, in Patsey's humming, emerge and unfold the meaning of the chant as well as its cultural and religious carriage. The often bewitched tone of the aforementioned accounts, though, obscures the racial imagination that nurtures them. Ronald Radano, studying a vast *corpus* of sources, focuses his attention on the racial distinctions and connotations on which the idea of black music developed. He also recognizes a few traits of shared space, where voices and experiences are at the forefront. In scenarios like the ones in camp meetings:

> as the songful utterances of Christians merged with the physical "cries and groans" of the struck, worshipers could be transported in a vibrant responsorial interchange of sonic-sensuous contact. It was at these sound-drenched moments of psychic precariousness that the bodily affecting force of "spiritual" encounter could produce within the frames of interracial singing a momentary glimpse of racial transcendence (Radano, 2003: 134).

While incorporating into his film crucial moments of singing, McQueen revitalizes this "sonic-sensuous contact", and uses it to portray an audiovisual image of singing a life in bondage that can be understood by his public. The effect is rather impressive because, even though this is an element of black vocality, it also "goes beyond race", as everyone can connect to the performance of the 'Roll Jordan Roll' song through either a personal experience of religious fervour or one of a passionate singing, or both.

In addition, despite the absence of singing, the voice itself plays a very important role in the book. Several vocal utterances have a remarkable position in describing the complexity of feelings of the field hands. They have been defined as slave utterances, and "include screams, falsetto, rasps, yells, calls, chants, cries, field hollers, grunts, groans, moans, keening (eerie wails), yodels, ululation and shouts – not to be confused with the ring shout or 'shout' associated with religious expression" (Payne, 2011: 884). They are ubiquitous both in the slave narratives and in the ex-slave interviews of the Federal Writers Projects, as well as in similar collections (Chiriacò 2014). They embodied the variety of possibilities of the voice as a means of expression, which has also found its way in singing practices. It would seem that these vocal expressions pertain to the world of pre-verbal expressions. This is but part of the reality, as the distinction between the word and the instrument that delivers it, the voice, is imprecise. Adriana Cavarero, in her philosophy of vocal expression, clarifies that "the semantic role of a word is saturated by a vocality that anchors it to the drives of the body" (Cavarero, 2003: 156). Within the context of slave utterances, the voice becomes also the *locus* of

the relationality. Slave culture, in other words, is the space where a multivocality prevails. It is the ensemble of different voices, their interconnected differences, which constitute values and meanings, as well as the ties of meanings and values, defining the perimeter of the collective expressions in the Southern plantation.

The role of these utterances is so fundamental that *12 Years a Slave*, the book, might be read as a vocal testimony, where the voices – although not as much the singing voice, but rather the voice as a basic element of the overall depiction – are often at the forefront. A compelling example of this is the march of slaves leaving Washington for Louisiana. In Solomon's own words, it becomes a vocal and sonic contrast: "The voices of patriotic representatives boasting of freedom and equality, and the rattling of the poor slave's chains" (Northup, 2013: 21–22). McQueen transforms it visually by using the strong image of the Capitol dome as the background for the departing coffle.

A similarly powerful example of the presence of such a voice in the book is the attempt to lynch Platt by Tibeats and his companions. McQueen uses the scene to portray one of the most disturbing passages of the movie, the one in which Platt, his neck in a noose, balancing on the tips of his toes, remains semi-hung on the massive live oak for an entire day. Platt's voice is in the forefront, both in the movie and in the book: "There I still stood in the noon-tide sun, groaning with pain". The voices, the one choked in the throat of a near-lynched man and the one expressing the woman's pity, formulate a paradigm of sorrow:

> The humble creature never knew, nor could she comprehend if she had heard them, the blessings I invoked upon her, for that balmy draught. She could only say, *Oh, Platt, how I do pity you*, and then hastened back to her labors in the kitchen (Northup, 2013: 77–78).

This paradigm of sorrow, and yet the wealth of the possibility to express it in all the implications and nuances, is what the black vocality here described represents at its most expressive point, later to be employed in a variety of musical and performative styles.

What McQueen's interpretation of the book unravels is a representation of how these vocal sounds, which are frequently described on print within the slave narratives and other accounts, found their way into vocal practices. The movie, therefore, confirms and simultaneously expands the idea of a black vocality as it has been structured by scholars and performers alike. Such a practice, in its original slave environment, is not separated from the social conditions. It is not separated from the soundscape of slavery. Quite the opposite, it resonates in, and it comes from, the physical space in which the slave society operated. As Carlo Serra indicates, in his investigation of the relationship between traditional vocal practices and space, there are streams of identification that cannot be disconnected. "We can silently assume that the chant is an intermediary element. It is

hyper-hyphenated. It can connect the human being with the voice of nature and therefore suggest a stream of identifications" (Serra, 2011: 105).

The connections between voices and soundscape in the plantation culture of the South remains an uninvestigated one. Such a study would contribute to a more profound understanding of the role that singing voices played in structuring the American slave culture. Northup gave us what might be considered a clue to where this exploration might lead, in his poignant, sonic description of Epps's land: "It is the literal, unvarnished truth, that the crack of the lash, and the shrieking of the slaves, can be heard from dark till bed time, on Epps' plantation, any day almost during the entire period of the cotton-picking season" (Northup, 2013: 117). While this exploration still has to be pursued, it is my argument that – by positioning it in the iconic sequences of the movie, and by transferring it from the book to the vocal performances – McQueen inserts such a vocality in a wider frame. He redefines it as a means of expression that finds its way in singing, as a socially meaningful practice, and as a culturally specific symbol. Simultaneously, McQueen positions black vocality in its original soundscape, making a strong contribution to the contemporary conceptualization of a traditional African-American singing voice. This is a fundamental stone for the reconstruction of a collective memory that is an indispensable tool to move "beyond race".

About the Author

Gianpaolo Chiriacò is a Lise Meitner researcher at the Archive of Popular Music–Universität Innsbruck. He is mainly interested in the history and anthropology of black singing voices, and in musical expressions of Afro-Italian identities and communities. He has been a fellow researcher at the University of Chicago and worked for three years at the Center for Black Music Research (Columbia College Chicago) thanks to a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship. He authored the book *Voci Nere. Storia e antropologia del canto afroamericano* (2018) and curated the symposia "Black Vocality: Cultural Memories, Identities, and Practices of African-American Singing Styles" (www.afrovocality.com). Chiriacò taught ethnomusicology and popular music at the University of Salento, where he also earned his PhD, and at the Freie Universität Bolzano-Bozen.

Notes

1. According to many journalists and some of the people present at the awards ceremony hosted by the New York Film Critics Circle, Armond White shouted insults towards Steve McQueen during the event, as he was stepping on stage to receive the award as best director. McQueen did not pay attention to the hostile words during that night, but afterwards, when Arsenio Hall reported them to him, he commented on the insults (https://www.indiewire.com/2014/01/watch-12-years-a-slave-director-steve-mcqueen-stays-classy-when-asked-about-armond-whites-comments-248517/, accessed June 1, 2020).
2. His exact words are: "one cannot underestimate the influence that President Barack Obama has had on all these recent films on African-American life" (Gates, 2013).

3. Director Steve McQueen made this claim during the press conference after the film's premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival. The question was: "can we talk about race in America?" In the video of the conference, McQueen's embarrassment is visible, as he argues that such a broad question overshadowed his movie (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qbHVhXlbYWA). A few months later, during the Academy Awards ceremony, he affirmed: "everyone deserves not just to survive, but to live".
4. During the symposium "Black Vocality: Cultural Memory, Identities, and Practices of African-American Singing Styles", held at Columbia College Chicago, September 24-25, 2013, as part of the international project project ROTVOSCIAME (The Role of Traditional Vocal Styles in Reshaping Cultural Identities Related to African Diasporas in America and Europe, http://www.afrovocality.com), the following working-definition of black vocality, drawing upon Meizel's study (2011a: 269), was used: "the set of vocal sounds, practices, techniques, values, qualities, meanings – as well as the entirety of the different combinations of them – that factor in the making of a black culture and in the negotiation of a black identity". Here, I use the same definition to investigate the role of black vocality in *12 Years a Slave*. For further discussions of singing and vocality within African-American contexts, see Chiriacò (2018), Eidsheim (2019), Griffin (2004), Jones (2019), Mentjes (2019), Newland (2014), Sebron (2018).
5. For a discussion about voice as a marker of race and identity, see Meizel (2011a, 2011b), Meizel and Scherer (2019), Eidsheim (2008, 2012, 2019), and Dunn and Jones (1994).
6. "Steve was the first to ask the big question, 'Why has there not been more films on the American history of slavery?' producer and actor Brad Pitt said last night at the film's world premiere at the Toronto Film Festival. 'And it was the big question it took a Brit to ask'" (Van Syckle, 2013).
7. The director is also concerned with bringing modern slavery to the public discourse. In the aforementioned acceptance speech of the Academy Award for Best Picture, McQueen said: "I dedicate this award to all the people who have endured slavery, and the 21 million people who still suffer slavery today".
8. When I use the expression "signify on", I rely on the concept of signifyin(g) in black culture, as theorized by Gates (1988), and developed within the musical context by Samuel A. Floyd, Jr (1995). The general definition that I am using here considers the signifyin(g) in the form of a reference to a culture or a subculture, whose meaning is expanded through the use of rhetorical figures.
9. These words come from the acceptance speech of Nikky Finney for the 2011 National Book Award. Her description of the effects of the slave codes, especially of the prohibition on becoming literate, is exceptionally touching (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2q15iiL79g).
10. Following Bresson's famous maxim, "the soundtrack invented silence" (Bresson, 1986: 38), scholar and composer Riccardo Giagni affirmed: "It is therefore in the sound film that the game of silence and hidden sound emerges as a newness and as an absolute truth". The original words are: "è dunque nel cinema sonoro che il gioco del silenzio e del suono nascosto emergono con una novità e una verità assolute" (Giagni, 2015: 22). It is interesting to note that silence is a singularly effective tool in *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, 2008), his first feature-length film. For a better understanding of Steve McQueen's aesthetics and artistic practices, see McQueen (2003, 2009, 2010, 2013).
11. My interpretation of silence as denial of the right to speak, and of the performance of slavery as a strategy to survive, is based on the works of two scholars: Judith Butler and

Shoshana Felman (Butler, 1997; Felman, 2003). Here I also use the concept of slave culture as it emerges from seminal works such as Levine (2007) and Stuckey (1987).

12. The condition of "free slave" is accurately described, in an article that appeared the day after the Academy Awards ceremony, by Henry Louis Gates Jr, who also worked as historical consultant for the production (Gates, 2014).
13. See, for example, Floyd (1995), and Fabre and O'Meally (1994).
14. *Half Slave, Half Free*, originally titled *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*, was produced for public television in 1984. A perfect example of the different focus is Solomon's last speech. Before leaving the plantation forever, he addresses his companions, and expresses his hope to save everybody, "to make a magic that would take us all". This monologue is not in the book, and it would be simply unimaginable in McQueen's movie. See also Ebiri (2013).
15. It also appears in other important collections, such as Work (1940: 199).
16. The rendition provided by John Legend, in *12 Years a Slave* (2013), the album that he produced, with "music from and inspired by the movie", is closer to the version reported by the old collection. In the same album, one can hear the original orchestral soundtrack composed by Hans Zimmer, and criticized by Ramsey (2013), who writes: "ironically – and there's no elegant way to put this – the string music that often accompanies scenes in which we are encouraged by the director to relate to Northup's emotional interior are the same chords in this summer's worldwide pop hit 'Get Lucky'. Yes – as in 'We're up all night to get lucky'". Although Ramsey admits that the "flat-lined" music represents "a decision that may have highlighted to some viewers how numbness may have become a strategy of survival", he is uncompromising in his criticisms. He states: "those of us who believe we know better about the emotional worlds of the enslaved from our studies may have found this move a missed opportunity". Even though Zimmer's score does sound uninvolved, and definitely not innovatory, one can argue that the emotional remove of the orchestral parts creates a fertile contrast with the presence and relevance of singing.
17. Although McQueen's focus on Solomon as a subject and on his struggle to survive is a prolific "move", to use Tillet's definition, towards a reshaping of memories of slavery, the concept of subjectivity is a problematic one when it emerges from a slave narrative. On the one hand, the role of David Wilson in the writing of *12 Years a Slave* might have been more substantial than he affirms in the 'Editor's Preface' (see Olney, 1984), therefore raising questions related to what we really know about the subjectivity of Solomon Northup. On the other hand, as Sabine Broeck effectively demonstrates in her analysis of John Locke's *Treatises*, the concept of subject, inherited as it is from the Enlightenment, requires a deeper understanding of how the slave trade might have affected the reasoning of European intellectuals who are considered founding fathers of modern thought. The "hermeneutics of epistemological suspicion from the point of view of the desubjectification of African human beings", for which she argues (Broeck, 2004: 245), poses interesting questions for anyone who aims at analysing representations and perceptions of black vocality.
18. That Ejiofor's voice here is redolent of black vocal performance practices is confirmed by various theorizations of African-American vocal styles. Stewart (1998: 6) defines the specific effect, that Ejiofor is moderately using, as a grunt, and he explains: "they [the grunts] are usually used during musical moments where their presence adds emotional emphasis or heightens the emotional drama of the music". Scholar and composer Andrew Legg confirms Stewart's view but uses a different term, gravel. "Gravel in the voice, [a device] used by many singers, is a commonly applied general characteristic

that also functions as a means of creating an impassioned emphasis and added intensity to a word or phrase" (Legg, 2010: 108). Definitions from African-American vocalists sometimes refer to the strong, powerful groan emphasized in their technique as "heavy voice" (Beauchamp 2010: 8). By using these vocal devices within the specific context, Ejiofor confirms both the intensity of feelings and the cultural identity expressed, and constructed, in his performance.

19. "If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul, – and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because there is no flesh in his obdurate heart" (Douglass, 1845: 14).

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