



## Millenarian Modernism in H. I. E. Dhlomo's *The Girl who Killed to Save*

Arthur Rose

To cite this article: Arthur Rose (2022) Millenarian Modernism in H. I. E. Dhlomo's *The Girl who Killed to Save*, English Studies in Africa, 65:1, 5-16, DOI: [10.1080/00138398.2022.2055853](https://doi.org/10.1080/00138398.2022.2055853)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00138398.2022.2055853>



© 2022 The Author(s). Co-published by Unisa Press and Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 28 Apr 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 17



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Millenarian Modernism in H. I. E. Dhlomo's *The Girl who Killed to Save*

Arthur Rose 

### Abstract

This essay takes as its starting point the final scene of H. I. E. Dhlomo's *The Girl who Killed to Save* (1935). Ostensibly an account of 'Nongqause the Liberator,' the prophet behind the Cattle Killing of 1856–1857, Dhlomo's play presents 'not merely a work of historical recovery or a reflection of increasing segregation but also an engagement with the full range of nationalist imaginings at work in the New African era' (Wenzel 83). In this regard, it is pertinent to recall that a more immediate precursor for the millenarianism presented in the play was the arrest of Nontetha Nkwkwe in 1922 and her death in the same year of its publication. Like Nongqause, Nkwkwe was a millennialist prophet. Responding to the Spanish Influenza, Nkwkwe's prophecies eventually provoked the South African authorities to incarcerate and then institutionalize her. Given the increased attention on the influenza as a shaping influence on the modernism of 1922 and after, this essay figures Dhlomo with an expanded global modernism that engages more explicitly with its millenarian correspondents.

**Keywords:** H. I. E. Dhlomo, global modernism, millenarianism, Nongqause/Nongqawuse, *The Girl who Killed to Save*

In the last moments of H. I. E. Dhlomo's *The Girl Who Killed to Save* (*Nongqause the Liberator*) (1935), a dying man, Daba, recounts a vision of Nongqawuse, the eponymous prophet whose famous vision of ancestors at the riverside sparked the events known as the Xhosa Cattle Killing of 1856–1857.<sup>1</sup> The bedridden Daba sits up with an 'unearthly expression on his face' and expounds on a moment when Nongqause meets with

a beautiful crowd singing ... the host of those who perished in the Great Famine ...  
They tell her that hunger and destitution drove them into the paths of life, led them to

the missionary and his divine message; put them into the hands of God. So there is triumph in death; there is finding in death; there is beauty in death. Nongqause laughs as she tells them that she was really in earnest but was ignorant. They laugh and sing. They call her their Liberator from Superstition and from the rule of Ignorance. The people are dressed, not in karosses and blankets as we are, but in Light – Light that makes it impossible to see their bodies or to distinguish their sex. (40)

Bright light then bathes Daba's face, and he stretches out a hand, appearing to hear Nongqause's call, before falling back on the bed, dead. Dhlomo leaves it unresolved whether this is a genuine prophecy or a fever-induced delusion. After all, Daba is introduced as 'a sick man lying in bed' (36). People around the bedside comment on 'this terrible sickness of Daba' and give him two kinds of 'medicine,' 'the medicine the missionary brought and the herbal mixture brought in by Mdhlamkomo, the herbalist' (38). He is given 'both preparations alternatively' (38, 37). A missionary 'puts a thermometer in his mouth' and a doctor, 'after feeling pulse and looking at the thermometer,' pronounces the case 'hopeless' (40).<sup>2</sup> In other words, the play foreshadows Daba's speech as not simply that of a dying man, but of a sick man, receiving medicine and having his temperature checked, and therefore potentially prone to feverish hallucinations.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, such moments of ambiguity seem less a formal trope than historical evidence of epidemic trauma's afterlife. After all, Daba's hallucinations recall the symptoms of the Great Influenza of 1918, a common point of reference in media discussions of the more recent crisis. In this, the play resonates with other examples that testify to Influenza's impact on modernist literature, a 'viral modernism' that, as Elizabeth Outka has demonstrated, stretches 'from Porter's depictions of delirium dreams to Woolf's and Eliot's death-haunted cityscapes to Yeats's visions of a second coming' (9). Salient to our purpose, Outka recalls that the biological effects of the virus brought about 'delirium states and later mental-health issues that both in reality and in the literature produced illusions of the dead returning' (9). Daba's vision of the resurrected dead is entirely congruent with Outka's account of 'viral resurrection,' the images of resurrection that 'infuse interwar literature and culture' (9).

At the same time, to focus only on the medical explanation for Daba's vision is to pass over the play's critical examination of the Cattle Killing as an anti-colonial millenarian movement, which was inspired by prophecy and sustained by the promise of an imminent transformation of society (the expulsion of the colonial presence). After all, most critical appraisals of Daba's speech have related it to the social, political and, above all, religious implications of Dhlomo's own assimilation into mission culture, and the implicit condemnation of the Cattle Killing coded in the titles of the play's five scenes. After Nongqause is introduced (Scene 1, tellingly subtitled 'The Ways of Delusion and Cruelty') and her message is militarized (Scene 2, 'The Tyranny of Superstition and Ignorance'), much of the play is mediated through the perspective of 'The Europeans' (Scene 3) and their encounter with 'The Victims' (Scene 4), as the full consequences of the Killing become apparent. Attempts to problematize Dhlomo's apparent acquiescence have relied on other moments of contestation in the play, like the frustrated militancy of the Xhosa chief, Kreli (Orkin 36), or the ambivalent silence of the black missionary, Tiyo Soga (the 'father of black nationalism', Wenzel 90). Eschewing this 'ritualized invocation of oppositionality,' Sheila Boniface Davies opens her reading of the play and passage by referencing Leon de Kock's account of the black mission-educated elite of the early twentieth century (Boniface Davies 141). For de Kock, Dhlomo and the other New Africans present 'evidence of a *desired identification* with the colonizing culture as *an act of affirmation*, a kind of publicly

declared “struggle” that does not oppose the terms of a colonial culture but insists on a more pure version of its originating legitimation’ (de Kock 392, emphasis his). But even Boniface Davies reads the passage as a straightforward evocation of ‘an enlightened people,’ whose sex and race are disguised: ‘they are indistinguishable from other peoples, and so at last, fully integrated’ (158).

To give the screw a further turn, the decision to receive Daba’s vision as deathbed prophecy or fever-dream also reflects the process by which millenarian messages are themselves believed or denied; whether, as the historian of millenarian movements, Albert I. Baumgarten, writes, the message of an imminent end or transformation ‘attracts a responsive audience’ or ‘is dismissed’ (ix). According to Baumgarten, such audiences comprise ‘people whose place in life has undergone a drastic change, *either a sudden rise or an acute fall,*’ who, moreover, ‘are especially aware of a sense of a world out of joint, and hence unusually interested in a message that preaches that their situation is not anomalous, but part of a larger pattern of imminent cosmic change’ (ix, original italics). Drawing on Baumgarten’s work, Michael Brisbois has argued for tracing a millenarian arc through canonical works of high and late modernism, like W. B. Yeats’s *A Vision* (1925) and ‘The Second Coming’ (1920), T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) and W. H. Auden’s ‘The Age of Anxiety’ (1944–1946). Brisbois’s suggestion that modernism responds to millenarian temporalities seems particularly apposite when juxtaposed with Outka’s strong reading of the pandemic’s ‘hidden force’ on canonical modernism, and not just because they analyze many of the same texts: the pandemic offering a material cause for the millenarian tendency to announce the end times.

Jennifer Wenzel has already shown how 19<sup>th</sup>-century anticolonial millenarian movements like the Cattle Killing arose in response to the ‘out of joint’ conditions created by the colonial situation. But the 1918 Influenza produced its own millenarian reactions, exemplified in the mission of the eastern Cape prophet, Nontetha Nkwenkwe. Nkwenkwe emerged as a Christian millenarian prophet in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Like Daba, she was inspired to her ministry by an illness (in her case, the 1918 Influenza pandemic). Like Daba, she espouses the style of dress and the values found in Revelations 7.9: ‘the great multitude ... clothed with white robes’. Read in this light, Daba’s vision forms a crux between the two events, the Killing and the Influenza, the overt millenarianism of the former drawing out its more subtle incarnation in the aftermath of the latter.

In this essay I argue that, in these attempts at recuperating the play, critics have overlooked Dhlomo’s sophisticated engagement with millenarian theology in Daba’s speech and the concomitant subversion of missionary politics that it achieves. By focusing on the internal contradictions that emerge when Christian evangelical movements arise out of their institutional counterparts, Dhlomo perhaps does not inaugurate the proto-typical anti-colonial revolutionary subject one might hope for; but he does join a conversation concerned with moments where global modernism and millenarian modernism meet.

My argument develops in three stages. In the first half of this essay, I show how Daba’s vision recalls the ending of another work of modernist millenarianism, George Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan* (1924), the historical play Shaw wrote after the Maid of Orleans was canonized in 1920 and which almost certainly contributed to his Nobel Prize the following year. Reading the two plays together uncovers Dhlomo’s formal engagement with Shaw’s reading of Protestantism, adapted to address basic contradictions in his own play’s ostensibly missionary message. I fit this formal analysis into the broader scholarship on generic and anti-colonial millenarianism to demonstrate that the play’s engagement with the topic is not merely a matter of

theme or content; it breaks down the progression of the millenarian movement into five stages that correlate with the play's five scenes. Scenes 2–5 anticipate, I suggest, Albert I. Baumgarten's four phases in the life of a millenarian movement: the arousal of interest in the millenarian message ('The Tyranny of Superstition and Ignorance'), the search for signs that this is the time of Apocalypse ('The Europeans'), the escalation or what Baumgarten calls 'upping the ante' ('The Victims') and the disconfirmation and aftermath of the message ('The Death of Daba') (ix–xiii). Crucially, it builds a more sympathetic account of such movements by anticipating an earlier, fifth stage (Scene 1), identified by Kenelm Burridge as the moment of 'severance' (115), when conditions of social upheaval produce fertile conditions for millenarian narratives to take hold. To contextualize this to early 20<sup>th</sup>-century South Africa, I consider an immediate historical antecedent, Nontetha Nkwenkwe, as a model for the Christian millenarianism Daba expounds. By invoking Nkwenkwe, I don't presume that the play is, in fact, a coded allegory, or even that Dhlomo was aware of Nkwenkwe's mission; instead, I juxtapose the two to expand my argument into a discussion of global and millenarian modernism. If Daba's illness is the flu, with its delirious dream-like visions of the returning dead, then Dhlomo's modernism need no longer be interpreted as belated (coming 'after' Shaw's, for instance) or autochthonic (framed by a separate 'South African' modernity), as often happens when critics try to balance global claims against crass homogenization. In the final stage of my argument, I suggest that reading *The Girl* as an exponent of a globalized 'viral modernism' offers an alternative, more equitable form of comparison, constituting a 'global modernism' through the localized effects of a pandemic whose effects were planetary.

## Shaw and Dhlomo

Ntongela Masilela and Boniface Davies have already shown how Dhlomo's critical writings reflect a deep admiration for Shaw. As early as 1933, an article penned by Dhlomo in *The Bantu World* would be preceded by a header calling for a 'Bernard Shaw': 'The day may come when the Bantu race will produce a Bernard Shaw to dramatise the story of Nongqawuse and reveal to humanity the greatness of her soul, notwithstanding the destructiveness of her dreams' (1). While the author is not given (the header suggests Dhlomo's essay should be read as a response to the comment, rather than its source), a felicitous congruity emerges if *Saint Joan* and Dhlomo's *The Girl* are treated as the subjects of the call and its response, especially since Dhlomo's essays of the 1930s and 1940s frequently return to the association between Nongqawuse and Joan. Boniface Davies shows that both plays attempt to recover their protagonists from a history that mistakes them for fools, traitors and witches. Hugh, she reminds us, anticipates just such a project in Scene Three:

Yes, I know that historians and writers will condemn Nongqause as a fool, a traitor, a devil-possessed witch. But is that everything that can be said about this? I hope to God not. No, I will not believe, I cannot believe that the tragedy which is now upon us can be explained in that way only. There must be something deeper. I believe that in the distant future someone will catch the proper spirit and get the real meaning of this incident and write about it. Who knows? (20)

In getting to 'the real meaning of this incident,' Dhlomo does not simply turn his Nongqause into Shaw's Joan: where Joan is certain and celibate, Nongqause has doubts about her prophecy and a

romantic relationship that she must disown for the sake of 'The People! The Truth!' (12). But both authors find elements of genius in their respective protagonists. For Shaw, as for Dhlomo, this was 'a person who, seeing farther and probing deeper than other people, has a different set of ethical valuations from theirs, and has energy enough to give effect to this extra vision and its valuations in whatever manner best suits his or her specific talents' (141). Or, indeed, someone with a great soul and destructive dreams. Shaw models a form of modernism that is more in keeping with Dhlomo's post-Romantic, non-experimental style than, say, the work of Luigi Pirandello. Following Christopher Innes's assessment of Shaw's modernism, Dhlomo becomes a modernist 'on an intellectual basis' since, like Shaw, he is concerned with 'representing a mode of thought specific to the period of social transition' but achieves this largely through a 'naturalism' that disowns modernist style (151, 152).

The similarities in the two playwrights' historical styling of Joan and Nongqause are perhaps most striking when comparing Daba's vision to Shaw's Epilogue. In the Epilogue, the ghost of Joan appears to King Charles, some twenty-five years after her death at the stake and on the eve of her trial being annulled. As their conversation continues, the ghosts of those involved in her trial begin to appear, to apologize to her for the roles they played in her death. They bow before her and congratulate her on being canonized. But when she offers to return to Earth, they hastily dismiss this, excuse themselves and disappear. A light descends upon her as she closes the play with the words, 'O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive Thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?' (136). Notwithstanding the brevity of Daba's vision and the length of the Epilogue, the two scenes parallel each other in their use of lighting to mark their visionaries. Illuminating Joan and Daba helps to recuperate the concerns they represent: the focus of the light serving to underscore the importance of Joan and Nongqause as historical subjects. Defending the Epilogue in his Preface to the published version, Shaw wrote: 'I could hardly be expected to stultify myself by implying that Joan's history in the world ended unhappily with her execution, instead of beginning there. It was necessary by hook or crook to shew the canonised Joan as well as the incinerated one' (180). Daba's vision, 'by hook or crook,' shows a Nongqause similarly canonized. But the light that frames their historical importance also isolates them, emphasizing that this recuperation is likely to be misunderstood. At the end of their respective plays, both figures languish, their popular reception predicated on a general misunderstanding of their message.

Dhlomo's tendency to list Joan alongside Nongqause as a historical figure worthy of dramatic immortalization continues in a passage he would repeat virtually verbatim in essays from the mid-1930s to the late 1940s, 'Drama and the African' (1936), 'Why Study Tribal Dramatic Forms?' (1939) and 'Zulu Folk Poetry' (1948):

Great art or thought (art is thought-feeling) is more than racial and national. It is universal, reflecting the image, the spirit, of the All-Creative Being who knows neither East nor West, Black nor White, Jew nor Gentile, time nor space, life nor death. The tragedy of a Job, an Oedipus, a Hamlet, a Joan, a Shaka, a Nongqause, is the tragedy of all countries, all times, all races. (7-8; 42; 59)

The juxtaposition of Job, Oedipus and Hamlet suggests the Joan, Shaka and Nongqause are literary, not just historical, figures, and thus implies an allusion to Shaw. For Boniface Davies, Shaw offered Dhlomo a comparable legitimization, helping black South Africans 'to be considered as equal and worthy of assimilation' by making 'their history and heroes ... acceptable,

or at least explicable, to colonial society' (159). But I think that this fails to appreciate the theological concerns of both plays, which are implied precisely in the allusion to Galatians 3:28 that Boniface Davies picks up on: 'there is neither Greek nor Jew, bond nor free, male nor female, white nor black, but all are one in Christ Jesus' (162). In Tom Lodge's gloss, the verse 'reflects the African National Congress's concept of a racially inclusive nation based on common values' (165). Its repetition leads de Kock to identify it as a key concern in the 'civil imaginary ... in emerging texts of African Nationalism' (402). But Dhlomo elides the recuperation at the end of the verse, 'all are one in Christ Jesus'. His All-Creative Being, reflected in universal art, is characterized by a negation of distinction, not by an ability to absorb all into itself. This seems an apposite response for a subject, who, as part of its formation in the civil imaginary, 'came to hold its *own* gaze fixedly on its *own* determinedly public appropriation of the values embedded in the civil ideal, despite or perhaps because of the dislocations of colonial temporality' (de Kock 404). For Dhlomo, these civil ideals found a useful rhetorical medium in the theology of *Saint Joan*.

The great heresy of Shaw's Joan is her Protestantism, and it is this that agitates the Church into executing her. Warwick sums up this anxiety nicely: 'It is the protest of the individual soul against the interference of priest or peer between the private man and his God. I should call it Protestantism if I had to find a name for it' (Shaw 68). Warwick must 'find a name for it,' because, in 1431, there has as yet been no Protest, but it cuts to the heart of why, for Shaw, Joan's story proves so compelling: she is killed because she eschews the mediation of the Church and its hierarchies in personal communions with God. The political ramifications of this 'heresy' continue in Daba's vision, where a non-racial, non-gendered collective celebrate their own Joan for instigating their metamorphosis. Like Joan at the end of Shaw's play, the true significance of this heresy is at risk of being forgotten: after Daba dies, a missionary begins to play the organ, reclaiming the scene for a more organized religiosity.

This may explain why most critics simply conflate Daba's vision and its aftermath with the 'missionary' argument, uttered by Hugh in Scene 2: the cattle killing was 'no national suicide' but a 'metamorphosis,' which 'will prepare the Xosa [sic] national soil—soul—for the early propagation of the message of the missionary, the blessings of medical science, the law and order of the administrator and the light of education' (23). Like Joan, however, Daba's vision displays an unmediated relationship of the faithful: if the missionaries are there, they are no longer white or black, but Light. This critical difference marked, Daba's scene begins to subvert white mediation in all four of Hugh's elements: the missionary message, medical science, the administrator's law and 'the light of education'. In this respect, it parallels, without repeating, the historicizing gesture implicit when Shaw identifies Joan's 'Protestantism'. Since, for Dhlomo, none of these tools are essentially European or Eurocentric, any attempt to assert the contrary demands a concomitant protestation. The message has been received, but from Nongqause and not the missionary; medical science is at work, but the doctor's medicine is taken 'alternatively' with a 'herbal mixture' (37, 38); men of authority visit the dying man, but risk looking ridiculous when they repeat the actions of their precursors; Daba is bathed in light, but the Light of the people, not of 'education'.

To clarify the distinctions in these subversive repetitions, I place them within a semiotic or Greimas square, which expands the implications of simple binary oppositions by considering what remains implicitly excluded from their pairing (i.e., the contradictions, or negations, of the opposing terms). By correlating the play's simple oppositions – between missionary and millenarian, Western and Indigenous cultures, white and black – to the contradictions that devolve

therefrom – non-missionary, non-millenarian, non-Western and so on – Daba's alignment with a missionary ideology begins to separate from his commitment to that ideology. Generating the square will permit us to differentiate Daba's position from its relegation to the missionary argument.

Before I turn to Daba, however, I need to place the play's 'missionary message' into the square, to establish the opposition upon which it is based, and the resulting contradictions and complements. Jennifer Wenzel observes one such opposition when, after quoting Hugh's description of the metamorphosis to show how the play risks being cast as 'apprentice [mission] literature' (87), she notes that it manages a more 'profound ambivalence, in both form and content' by including, as a silent presence, the black missionary, Tiyo Soga. Soga, Wenzel notes, is on record as having called the cattle killing 'the Xhosa national suicide,' which places him in opposition to Hugh, who says it was 'no national suicide'. Framed in this way, the opposition lies between two competing versions or interpretations of the Killing for the missionaries, the contrast emerging between black and white figures (Soga and Hugh).

Although a useful starting point, this antagonism neglects the play's more fundamental opposition between the missionary message (represented by *both* Soga and Hugh) and the millenarian prophecy, which also finds itself represented by two figures, Nongqause, the prophet, and Mhlakaza, her interpreter. Mhlakaza's bombastic certainty presents a striking contrast to the nuanced self-doubt that characterizes Nongqause's discussions in Scene 1, and so the opposing positions of Nongqause and Mhlakaza parallel the later opposition between Soga and Hugh. By layering the relationships Soga/Hugh, and Nongqause/Mhlakaza on top of each other, certain structural commonalities emerge. Both Hugh and Mhlakaza assume an opportunistic certainty about their respective messages (the positive seme), in opposition to Soga's silence and Nongqause's anxiety about knowing the 'truth' of her prophecies 'without doubt' (9). The relationship of certainty and doubt repeats across three oppositions, not only between the confident assertions of Hugh and Mhlakaza, and the ambiguities of the responses by Soga and Nongqause, but also insofar as the acceptance of the missionary's message depends on doubting the millenarian prophecy and vice versa.

From the relation between certainty and doubt, I can establish the contradictions that will complete the square. At first glance, this appears to resolve itself as the antagonism between certainty (Hugh and Mhlakaza) and doubt (Nongqause and Soga) on the one hand, and between missionary (Hugh and Soga) and millenarian (Nongqause and Soga) belief on the other. But certainty, for Hugh and Mhlakaza, depends on expressions of rhetorical authority, whose contradictions are found in Nongqause's doubt and Soga's silence. Equivocation or silence are the two strategies the play employs when expressing certainty's contradiction, uncertainty. But the reciprocal contradiction of doubt ('without doubt,' in Nongqause's phrase) cannot simply be explained as rhetorical certainty: it demands the annulment of doubt, which none of these characters presents.

The contrary relationship, certainty and doubt, manifests as a belief in the self and a disbelief in the other. The contradiction of the positive seme, certainty, is non- or uncertainty about the self, expressed in Nongqause's equivocation and Soga's silence. But the contradiction of doubt, non-doubt, cannot simply be explained by the opportunistic arguments of Hugh and Mhlakaza, even if their rhetorical certainty did initiate the primary opposition. As interpreters of the catastrophe, they depend too much on an emphatically rhetorical certainty ever to eliminate doubt wholly. The term that really encapsulates the expression of non-doubt is 'testimony,' and the only testimony that isn't doubted, even if only because it appears as the final word, is Daba's.

If Daba completes the square, it is not because he ‘believes’ in himself, as do Hugh and Mhlakaza, or because he ‘distrusts’ himself, like Nonqause, or equivocates on such expressions of self-belief, like Soga. Rather, he has fully realized the obliteration of self and subsummation into the crowd that proved so compelling for Nongqause and her handmaids in Scene 1. This is first introduced as the love/hate that good/bad men/women feel when they love one/the crowd. When a woman loves one man, they hate ‘all other men’; when a man loves ‘women,’ they ‘despise devotion to one woman’ (2). The heteronormative misogyny is overwhelming, but it does introduce a pattern that Nongqause will bring up slightly later: ‘The nation’s love leaves me lonely. The nation’s willingness to perish haunts me. To be loved by a nation – by crowds – means that no one enters your heart, rules, sympathizes with, and understands it. I want to be loved by and to love one man’ (9). What distinguishes Daba from the rest is his incorporation into the crowd. Here, Dhlomo breaks with Shaw, whose Joan relies, principally, upon her own certainty: for Dhlomo, the prophet is remarkable not so much for her private communion with God, the Ancestors or the Spirits, but in the commitment that she generates in the people that follow her.

### **Millenarianism and the Influenza**

Millenarian movements typically emerge, writes Kenelm Burridge, in a moment of disenfranchisement or severance. For Burridge, this severance is the first of three stages; it is followed by action, as a prophet emerges, and aftermath, when either the narrative is realized, the followers form a sect or there is a general return to the first phase. For Baumgarten, this ‘arousal’ of the people presages three subsequent phases, the search for signs, the escalation (or ‘upping the ante’) and disconfirmation (or failure) and its aftermath. Importantly, millenarianism seeks to collapse the progress narrative of modernity, the better to set a ‘millenarian narrative in motion’ (Brisbois 141). This allows the transition from so-called normal time to an abnormal temporality that anticipates the Apocalypse.

By merging Burridge’s model with Baumgarten’s to form five stages – severance, arousal, searching, escalation and disconfirmation – and mapping these onto the five Scenes of the play, Dhlomo’s work might be interpreted as replicating millenarian expansion and disappointment. Scene 1 establishes the moment of severance; it shows how all existing customs lose their groundings (*lobola* loses its meaning for the Old Man when cattle are worthless), and it explores the dilemma of emerging as a prophet. Scene 2 imagines the arousal of the people and their commitment to the cause. Scene 3 mediates the search for signs through the second-hand discussions of the missionaries, and Scene 4 explores the consequences of ‘escalation’. Rather than resolve the situation in disconfirmation, realization or sectarianism, Scene 5 forces the spectator to decide whether or not they believe Daba and his millenarian narrative.

This implies a formal engagement that resonates with *The Girl’s* ‘currency’ in the 1930s: ‘less than a decade’ before, ‘millenarian prophecy sparked livestock slaughter throughout Natal and the Transkei in anticipation of African American deliverance’ (Wenzel 83). For Wenzel, the most compelling example is the Bulhoek Massacre of 1921, when the Israelites, followers of the millenarian prophet, Enoch Mgijima, were shot by police. If she rightly links this upsurge to the disenfranchisement of black South Africans by the 1913 Native Lands Act, I want to suggest that the 1918 Influenza must also be considered, since it killed 6% of the South African population and disproportionately affected black South Africans. Indeed, Hugh’s metamorphosis argument was repeated in missionary accounts of the pandemic. In his thesis on the

impact of the pandemic in South Africa, Howard Phillips quotes a contemporary account in a Methodist newsletter:

The terrible mortality during the epidemic has awakened the heathen peoples as nothing in recent times has done, and they are flocking in large numbers to the Churches, opening their houses for Evangelistic Work, calling Christian people to pray with them, and looking to the Missionaries for direction and help as they have never done before. It is a golden opportunity if we are ready to take it and use it. (175)

Whatever its effects on the fifteen-year-old Dhlomo, the flu's incipient millenarianism presents itself in a hymn by his cousin, Reuben Caluza, 'Influenza (1918),' which, like *The Girl*, was published by the Lovedale Press: 'In the year nineteen eighteen / We're killed by the disease called influenza . . . . It was like there was a black cloud over the earth . . . . Only they were successful who worshiped him' (in Okigbo 96). Wenzel has a substantial account of the musical score that accompanies the original Lovedale edition, which begs comparison with Caluza's hymn. Here, however, I use it simply to gesture to potential lines of argument that connect the play and the influenza, and so offer a further figure in the play's 'currency'. For, at this time, another millenarian prophet figure that emerges who was inspired to her mission after recovering from the influenza: Nontetha Nkwenkwe. Nkwenkwe's millenarianism offers a compelling counterpoint to Daba's fever-induced hallucination.

For Nkwenkwe, 'God had unleashed *umbathalala* [the Influenza] as *isibeto*, a punishment for people's sins. To achieve, they had to make a dramatic change in their ways. Her revelation came in a series of dreams she had soon after her own bout with the flu' (Edgar and Sapire 8). And as Robert Edgar and Hilary Sapire also record in their biography of Nkwenkwe, 'she realized she had died and returned to life' (10). Nkwenkwe's visions, and her subsequent sectioning, may be explained, in part, by the acute and chronic effects of the influenza's long shadow.

It stretches my evidence to assume that Dhlomo *meant* Daba to act as a point of reference either to the influenza or to the prophet, though the flu's importance for modernism's millenarianism demands further scrutiny. Effectively, Dhlomo uses Daba's fever in much the same way as other modernist writers use the influenza: to render, in Elizabeth Outka's terms, a scene that is 'full of ghosts, delirium visions, the walking dead, flashbacks, and a sense of deadly vitality' (100). Since the flu confounds any straightforward attempt to accept Daba's testimony as true (it may be a hallucination) or false (it may be a death-bed prophecy), the semiotic square may expand this binary. If the locus of the square shifts from 'the missionary message' to 'the blessings of medical science,' it retains a similar pattern of certainty, doubt, non-certainty and non-doubt. People treat the medicine of their own culture with certainty, the medicine of the other with scepticism, but they also hedge their bets ('non-certainty') by using both 'alternatively'. The only medicine with proven efficacy is the one that causes, or appears to cause, Nongqause's 'hysteromania-like trance' (6). Whether or not this medicine causes the trance, it is clear that it, too, finds its efficacy in testimony, as an expression of non-doubt. The only way not to doubt that a medicine works is to show that it works. This medical relationship cannot be disconnected from the rest of the play. Accordingly, when related to the 'message' square developed previously, a pattern emerges that could be misinterpreted as an organic process of hybridization, but is better served by the term Wenzel uses, 'mixing'. Daba's situation is not Christian Western or Animist Indigenous, but neither does it merge the two. Daba's family do not put the medicines

together; they give them alternatively. Even Daba's testimony relies on different elements that remain distinct rather than simply fused together.

In the model exemplified by Daba, the truth of Nkwenkwe's message is not to be found in her own certainty: it is found in the belief of her followers. In this respect, Daba repeats three key features insisted upon in Nkwenkwe's ministry: she insisted upon an African unity, or *umanyano*, disavowed 'distinctions between Christians and non-Christians,' and promoted the use of 'a long line of Xhosa religious innovators' (Edgar and Sapire 19, 12, 13). When interpreting this message, her followers frequently associated its images of unity and liberation with Marcus Garvey and the promise that 'African-Americans would come, unlock the doors of their jail cells, and set them free' (31). In Daba's vision, the people, undifferentiated by sexual or religious markers, join together in celebrating their eventual liberation as made possible by an African religious leader. This presents, albeit in the discourse of Evangelical Pentecostalism, some of the same pedagogical ambitions found in Dhlomo's essays of the 1930s and 1940s, not least the invocation, quoted earlier, about a universal art.

## Millenarian Modernism

Whether or not the novelists, dramaturges, poets and hymn writers themselves believe in the millenarianism their images appear to espouse, the language of millenarianism runs through modernism, and viral modernism in particular. Indeed, a measure of the distinction between the millenarian and the modernist may likely be set at whether greater allegiance lies in the content of what is said, or with its form. By linking the play to a broader tendency towards millenarianism in modernism, I sidestep an unresolved tension in Dhlomo criticism in identifying him as a modernist, and, by extension, a broader problem in identifying works of global modernism, as belated or autochthonous.

In this, Dhlomo serves as an exemplary case. While some critics have been happy to identify Dhlomo as an 'African' (Masilela), 'South African' (Munslow Ong), or 'refracted' (Voss) modernist, these identifications are qualified by concerns, raised by Nicholas Meihuizen, that this modernism remains 'secondary, not constitutive' (194).<sup>3</sup> To make the case for Dhlomo as a modernist, one must either insist on his belated transformation of an 'alien' modernism to fit a South African context, or offset this Eurocentrism by foregrounding the works' autochthonous elements. Even when elaborated into an entire tradition, as in Jade Munslow Ong's examination of an anglophone 'South African Modernism,' modernism sometimes seems too freighted with Eurocentric significance to warrant the effort. This might explain why David Attwell effectively jettisons the term, even when treating overtly modernist themes like traditionalizing modernity and modernizing tradition in his account of the 1938/39 Dhlomo-Vilakazi dispute. It is given similarly short shrift in Jennifer Wenzel's account of anticolonial millenarianism in *The Girl* itself. From the 1973–1986 Visser-Couzens recovery project to the expansive criticism of Bhekizwe Peterson, many are happy to call Dhlomo a 'modern' writer facing 'modern' socio-political concerns; fewer see the utility in cleaving to a tradition that's still often all too Eurocentric, if not entirely European.

I wonder, however, if this might not speak to the problems inherent when literary history is based primarily on the dynamics of intertext and influence internal to a work and the external socio-political contingencies of empire, colonialism and injustice that shape these. These forces are key, no doubt, but they naturally predispose us to read the work along the lines of publication, sales, import and export forged by empire, blinding us to other strategies for thinking

about works on a more equitable basis.<sup>4</sup> The 1918 Influenza pandemic offers an alternative site for this socio-political engagement, while its attendant millenarian rhetoric supplies the formal basis for comparison. Certainly, following the work of Jane Elizabeth Fisher and Outka, the traces of the Influenza in canonical works of Anglophone modernism have become easier to spot. But since no country can claim priority over the poetics of the pandemic (which, moreover, remain largely latent), these signs can be used to bring together works as apparently disconnected as *The Girl* and, say, Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), without casting one as subordinate or peripheral to the other. Instead of casting the global modernist as someone late to the debate, reliant solely or even primarily on internal influences, or out of converse with a 'singular modernity,' shaped by a world-system of combined and uneven development, the imprint of global modernism is better understood when taken as a set of localized responses that constitute the aliquot parts of a global event.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Following Wenzel (2009), I use the accepted spelling of Nongqawuse's name to refer to the historical person and 'Nongqause' to refer to Dhlomo's character.
- 2 Since the portable medical thermometer was only invented in 1867 by Thomas Clifford Allbutt and the Cattle-Killing took place in 1857–1858, the former's anachronistic appearance only reinforces the impression that medical interpretations are significant for this final scene.
- 3 See Munslow Ong's criticism of Meihuizen's assumption that African writing takes its bearings from 'European modernism'.
- 4 By this, I don't mean to dismiss as unimportant the qualification that such strategies are motivated by the politics of recovery; rather, I want to insist, rather strongly, that the relative canonicity of the Pounds, Eliots and Woolfs have always relied on recovery projects, from Laura (Riding) Jackson and Robert Graves's 1928 *A Survey* through to the canonical mainstays of Hugh Kenner, Theodor Adorno and Frank Kermode.
- 5 I am grateful to Rick de Villiers and the two peer reviewers for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this article. My errors remain my own.

## ORCID

Arthur Rose  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0817-6898>

## Works Cited

- Attwell, David. *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006.
- Baumgarten, Albert I. 'Introduction'. In *Apocalyptic Time*. Edited by Albert I. Baumgarten. Leiden: Brill, 2000. Vii–xv.
- Boniface Davies, S. *History in the Literary Imagination: The Telling of Nongqawuse and the Xhosa Cattle-Killing in South African Literature and Culture (1891–1937)*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Doctoral thesis, 2011.
- Brisbois, Michael. *Millenarian Moderns: A Study of Utopian Desire*. Calgary: University of Calgary Doctoral thesis, 2013.

- Burridge, Kenelm. *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1969.
- Couzens, Tim. *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhlomo*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985.
- De Kock, Leon. 'Sitting for the Civilization Test: The Making(s) of a Civil Imaginary in Colonial South Africa'. *Poetics Today* 22(2), 2001: 391–412.
- Dhlomo, H.I.E. 'Bantu Dramatic Society Stages Its First Show'. *Bantu World*, 15 April 1933.
- Dhlomo, H.I.E. 'Drama and the African' [1936]. *English in Africa* 4(2), 1977: 3–8.
- Dhlomo, H.I.E. *The Girl who Killed to Save (Nonqausa the Liberator)*. Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1935.
- Dhlomo, H.I.E. 'Why Study Tribal Dramatic Forms?' [1939]. *English in Africa* 4(2), 1977: 37–42.
- Dhlomo, H.I.E. 'Zulu Folk Poetry' [1948]. *English in Africa* 4(2), 1977: 43–59.
- Edgar, Robert R. and Sapire, Hilary. *African Apocalypse: The Story of Nontetha Nkwenkwe, A Twentieth-Century South African Prophet*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999.
- Innes, Christopher. 'Modernism'. In *George Bernard Shaw in Context*. Edited by Brad Kent. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015: 151–159.
- Lodge, Tom. 'Charters from the Past: The African National Congress and Its Historiographical Traditions'. *Radical History Review* 46/47, 1990: 161–88.
- Masilela, Ntongela. *The Cultural Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo*. Trenton: World Africa Press, 2007.
- Meihuizen, Nicholas. 'Modernism in Sub-Saharan African Literature'. In *The Modernist World*. Edited by Allana C. Lindgren and Stephen Ross. Abingdon: Routledge, 2015. 189–196.
- Munslow Ong, Jade. *Olive Schreiner and African Modernism: Allegory, Empire and Postcolonial Writing*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2018.
- Okigbo, Austin C. 'South African Music in the History of Epidemics'. *Journal of Folklore Research* 54(1), 2017: 87–118.
- Orkin, Martin. *Drama and the South African State*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991.
- Outka, Elizabeth. *Viral Modernisms: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.
- Peterson, Bhekizizwe. "'The Black Bulls" of H.I.E. Dhlomo: Ordering History out of Nonsense'. *English in Africa* 18(1), 1991: 25–49.
- Phillips, Howard. *'Black October': The Impact of the Spanish Influenza Epidemic of 1918 on South Africa*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Doctoral Thesis, 1984.
- Shaw, Bernard. *Saint Joan*. Edited by Jean Chothia. London: Methuen Drama, 2008 [1924].
- Visser, N.W. 'H.I.E. Dhlomo (1903–1956): The Re-emergence of an African Writer'. *English in Africa* 1(2), 1974: 1–10.
- Voss, Tony. 'Refracted modernisms: Roy Campbell, Herbert Dhlomo, N.P. van Wyk Louw'. *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*. Edited by David Attwell and Derek Attridge. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 339–359.
- Wenzel, Jennifer. *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.