

Performance and Politics in a Time of Confinement: Virtual Stages between South Africa and African America

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Abstract

This essay spotlights performances, social and artistic, in 2020 that touch points on the circum-Atlantic routes that have linked Africa, African-America and Europe for centuries and which speak to the long history as well as to present expressions of sorrow and revolt in the crisis and confinement of the COVID-19 pandemic. I use the intimate reception of performance in confinement and at times and locations at odds with the performance to reflect on performance and time and performance in times, especially the asynchronous experience of watching shows recorded months or years earlier in distant places. I focus on the rearrangement of Reuben Caluza's dirge *Influenza* composed in response to the 1918 pandemic by Philip Miller with video by Marco Martins, which captures people in confinement and during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, and on Neo Muyanga's *A Maze in Grace* which uses music, dance to explore the links among Liverpool, which housed slaver later preacher John Newton who wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace*, former slave coasts of West Africa and Muyanga's South Africa, with the site of the premiere in former slave port São Paulo. These pieces, especially *Amazing Grace*, prompt reflection on contagion, mourning and

acknowledgment along the circum-Atlantic from Charleston to Chicago.

Keywords: African America, audiencing, choral song, circum-Atlantic, COVID-19, hymn, Miller, Muyanga, structural racism. South Africa

Prologue

June 2020. COVID-19 was spreading across the globe and on its way to rivalling other historic mass death events including the influenza pandemic of 1918. In Chicago, despite lockdowns and stay-at-home-orders, people were in the streets protesting another epidemic, police violence, and its roots in the structural racism that has tainted the United States since the country's foundation. Confined to home by the pandemic as well as by a septic hip, unable to venture onto the streets, into a theatre or on a planned trip to my native Johannesburg, I was more than usually tied to video and the Internet for news and information, for entertainment and for solace. Two South African artifacts in particular captured my attention and offered unexpected engagement with performance and politics in this time of confinement—Philip Miller's 2020 arrangement of 1930s composer Reuben Caluza's dirge in memory of *Influenza 1918* and Neo Muyanga's response, in music and dance, to *Amazing Grace*—a hymn by a former slave trader turned penitent, which has joined sorrow songs and other sacred melodies in the repertoires of both South Africans and African Americans. I saw a short recording of Muyanga's piece as part of the COVID-19 virtual edition of South Africa's National Arts Festival, usually held annually in June, but the journey of its creation—commissioned in Liverpool, formerly Britain's slave port, and performed in February 2020, before COVID-19 emerged into view, in São Paulo, one of the largest reception points for enslaved people in the Americas—linked past and present points on the circum-Atlantic routes that have touched Africa, Europe and the Americas, especially diasporic African America for centuries and which trace the long history as well as to present expressions of sorrow and revolt.^[1]

Returning a year later to these events and to the circum-Atlantic trajectories that link Africa and the Americas today, as they have historically, I suggest in this essay that Miller's and Muyanga's combination of local reference and global reach, and the intimate yet resonant reception their works for voice and video invite, as a point of departure for exploring circum-Atlantic places and time even while locked down in front of a video screen and, taking cues from both from public action and intimate reception in our plague year in which public turbulence has been bounded by confinement and private sorrow, and the reception of performance framed by the video screen and the private dwelling.

Before looking more closely at Miller and Muyanga and their ties to circum-Atlantic trajectories, I begin by outlining the range of their work for those readers who do not yet know them. Miller (b.1964) and Muyanga (b.74) are composers who have co-created works in theatre, dance and opera and thus tapped into African, European and African American cultural flows that have influenced local music theatre. Unlike dialog-based drama performed in English during the anti-apartheid period in South Africa by performers who might prefer

African languages, music theatre has harnessed skills acquired in church choirs over more than a hundred and fifty years of African Christian liturgy, a hundred years or so of variety concerts, and township musicals over at the last fifty years since around 1950. Building on this foundation, South African composers and singers have added opera, cantata and other Western genres to their expertise in four-part harmony and choral singing to create new forms of staging and “audiencing” to honor the living and, in our present context, as the plague year extends into the future, mourn the dead.^[2]

Miller trained in Cape Town, a historic South Atlantic port whose history has links not only to Britain but also to former British colonies in the Caribbean and to trade and other traffic across the South Atlantic. Miller is well known for collaborations with artist William Kentridge and for *Rewind: Cantata for Voice, Tape and Testimony* (2006/2011), which premiered in Cape Town’s St. George’s Cathedral, formerly a key anti-apartheid sanctuary. This cantata combined recorded testimonials to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1996–99) with hymns, songs and other sounds. Above all melodies, the Xhosa hymn *Lizalis’ idinga lakho/ Thixo Nkosi yinyaniso [Fulfil your promise/ Lord God of Truth]* by Rev. Tiyo Soga (1829–71) pervaded the hearings in the familiar setting by John Knox Bokwe (1915), whose name honors the founder of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Miller added variations on this hymn, which turned plaintive or angry in accord or discord with the testimony. To express this anger, he arranged in counterpoint to the nineteenth century hymn the twentieth century protest song *Siyaya ePitoli [We are Marching to Pretoria]*, the Zulu variant of a song that has moved marchers since the Anglo-Boer War. *Siyaya ePitoli* was performed during the cantata in the staccato rhythm that since the 1970s has accompanied the *toyi-toyi*, a dance-trot favored by South African protesters.^[3] Muyanga grew up in Soweto surrounded by protest marching but he draws not only on political performance but also on African hymns and on European music from madrigals to operas. He is best known for a medley of hymns, protest, and praise songs that includes Enoch Sontonga’s *Nkosi sikhalel’ iAfrica [God Bless Africa; 1897; now the national anthem]*, and praises for Mandela and other leaders, which he has disseminated as both *Revolting Music* and *Massa Revoltante* (2015–16), but his platform Pan-African Space Station opens up to the African diaspora to include tributes, as its name implies, to Afro-futurist musicians like Sun Ra, as well as Black moderns such as Nina Simone who combined classical training and political commitment.^[4]

Recalling these legacies in stage and musical performances, Miller’s arrangement of *Influenza 1918* and Muyanga’s of *Amazing Grace* explore the potential of video to touch audiences separated by time, space and also language. Music may be the quintessential time-based art conventionally associated with intimate absorption in spaces where politics echoes but may not directly penetrate. Despite their private reception, as I hope to show, these video pieces disseminated across multiple temporalities and points across the globe, including several in South Africa and African America—Johannesburg, Cape Town, São

Paolo and Chicago—resonate with the public impact of COVID-19. Their voices evoke the experience of mourning but also invite reflection on contagion and care and the politics of repair and restorative justice.

Contagion

Influenza 1918, a dirge for a double quarter of voices that was created by South African composer Reuben Caluza (1895–1969) after the global influenza pandemic, reappeared online during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As of May 2021, the 1918 pandemic is still the worst in the historical record; it killed fifty million people worldwide and infected at least five hundred million, a third of the global population (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). In South Africa, three hundred thousand or 6% of the population died in the six weeks around the aptly named Black October 1918 (Philips 68).^[5] Caluza, who later studied at Columbia University in New York, was committed to recording sacred and secular music in African and syncretic idiom; apart from the title and the date, the dirge is in Zulu. It was published by Lovedale Mission Press in 1918 and recorded by Caluza’s Double Quartet in London in 1930 (*Caluza’s Double Quartet*).^[6] Although the recording includes upbeat hits like *Ama-Oxford Bags* [1922] and protest songs such as *Sixotshwa emsembenzini* [*They are firing us from work*; 1924], *Influenza* begins with keening sopranos who open the dirge accompanied by Caluza on piano, joined in the second verse by base voices heralding the ominous personification of influenza that “took [*wathatha*]” without mercy older and younger, married and single people. The concluding verse, led by Evelyn Caluza’s alto, stresses Presbyterian norms by urging young people to avoid temptation and fear God, implying that the pandemic might have been an act of a wrathful deity.

The revival in May 2020 of *Influenza 1918* offers a rich tapestry of sound and image that weaves together the pandemics of 1918 and 2020. Working with recordings made by musicians confined to their homes,

Still from *Influenza 1918* arranged by Philip Miller with video by Marco Martins (May 2020). Reprinted with permission

Miller featured trombone and flugelhorn rather than piano, but in muted tones that fit the unseen domestic spaces where the music was recorded as well as the otherwise silent footage by Marco Martins of young people confined to small apartments during lockdown. For the double quartet of voices, where Caluza had three sopranos, two altos, one tenor, base and baritone, Miller cast two tenors and two bass against two sopranos, with only one alto and the single baritone.^[7] In this version, tenor Lulama Mgceleza opened with a solo, and fellow tenor Masi Malima led the concluding admonition, modulating the original contrast between soprano and bass while maintaining its sorrowful tone. Martins’ video picks up the dirge’s focus on young people, who were felled in much greater numbers by the 1918 influenza than by COVID-19. His images soften the Calvinist admonition of the dirge with clips of children and adults doing daily tasks, even though they pause sometimes to gaze at the empty streets of inner-city Johannesburg. In contrast to widely circulated news footage of people in Italy and elsewhere in the European spring, who came out on open balconies to

serenade nurses, doctors and other medical workers during lockdown, Martins' subjects linger on thresholds obstructed by burglar bars and the longer shadows of winter. The eerily quiet urban streets recall similar images elsewhere across the world, but the grilles and bars across windows and balconies in Johannesburg remind viewers of South African concern about burglaries and other threats of intrusion. Nonetheless, although the image-track is crossed by bars whose shadows deepen the dirge on the soundtrack, the intimate close-ups of people living ordinary lives in domestic spaces suggest tenacity and hope. Even after lockdown has been loosened in 2021, this dirge, in concert with Miller's arrangements of other pieces by Caluza, encourages deep listening across the century to echoes from Caluza's time to ours.

Mourning

Muyanga extends the temporal range of singing and listening in mourning and recollection even further than one century. His piece *A Maze in Grace* (2020) responded to a commission for a planned biennale in Liverpool to unravel the tangled history of *Amazing Grace*, the hymn written by John Newton (1725–1807), an English slaver who became an abolitionist preacher. Newton sailed many times from Liverpool to the Americas via the West African coast but abandoned the slave trade after a conversion that he compared to St. Paul's. Noting that *São Paulo* was also a key port on the former slave routes to Brazil, which over the course of three centuries absorbed more enslaved people than any other country, Muyanga responded not only to the original text published in 1779 but also to the familiar shape-note version which Anglo-American Baptist William Walker borrowed from the folk-tune "New Britain" in 1835.^[8] This version reached South Africa by way of British and American missionaries, including Black members of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, but its place in the African repertoire was reinforced by African American dissemination of the hymn in the nineteenth century and performances in the twentieth, from Mahalia Jackson's 1947 record to countless Civil Rights marchers, to opera singer Jessye Norman's recital at London's Wembley Stadium for Nelson Mandela's 70th birthday in 1988. Before his appearance scheduled for the Liverpool Cathedral in September 2020 was canceled due to COVID-19, Muyanga presented *A Maze in Grace* at the 34th São Paulo Biennale in February 2020, accompanied by Brazilian performance group Legitima Defesa, whose name alludes to Black American activist Malcolm X who called in his founding speech of the Organization of Afro-American Unity in 1964 for "legitimate defense by all means necessary" of African-descendant people around the world (33–67).

These circum-Atlantic threads linking African diasporas in South and North America with Africa north and south of the equator, the performance in Brazil with Muyanga's home-base in South Africa, retraced routes taken by enslaved people that Muyanga had explored in earlier works, such as his composition for *Cargo* (2007), Magnet Theatre and Jazzart Dance Theatre's piece about the legacy of slavery at the Cape of Good Hope.^[9] After premiering at the Spier Wine Estate, which employed enslaved people from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, *Cargo* appeared in 2007 at the National Arts Festival (NAF), South

Africa's largest gathering of artists and fans, which attracts thousands to Grahamstown/Makhanda in June/July every year.^[10] The NAF responded to the pandemic in 2020 by moving the program—theatrical and musical performances, film screenings, and gallery exhibitions—entirely online. Muyanga offered a 28-minute clip that featured mezzo-soprano Tina Mene from Khayelitsha, a large semi-formal settlement outside Cape Town, alongside Legitima Defesa.^[11] In the video, a white gauze net hanging from the atrium ceiling represented a sailing ship, of the kind that Newton sailed to Brazil, while dancers, led by Muyanga with a bullhorn, transformed the hymn into call-and-response segments between performers down below and participants in the gallery above, in a rhythm that accompanied a slowed-down version of the *toyi-toyi* that has accompanied South African protest since the 1970s. The work by Muyanga and videographer Bianca Turner amplified *Amazing Grace* as a song of protest as well as a hymn of penitence, giving the famous line “I was lost but now I'm found” the force of militant solidarity reaching beyond the voice of the original “wretch” to encompass multitudes striving for freedom.

Traversing space and time between prayer and protest, enslavement and emancipation, along circum-Atlantic routes of African diasporas, *A Maze in Grace* may not yet have landed at U.S. ports, but it nonetheless invites connection between past and present ports of call along these routes. In Charleston, South Carolina, established as Charles' Town in 1670 by associates of the English king who used the royal charter to enrich themselves using enslaved labor, U.S. president Barack Obama offered a eulogy in June 2015 at the funeral service for congregants murdered by a white supremacist at the Mother Emanuel AME Church (est. 1817), where he also sang *Amazing Grace*. From Goldsboro, North Carolina, the Rev. William Barber, revivor of the Poor Peoples Campaign, which was founded in 1968 after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., preached in December 2020 of a Mourning Christmas to honor the dead. He ended however by concurring with W. E. B. Du Bois, author of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *Black Reconstruction in America* (1956), that African American sorrow songs “breathe” not only sorrow but also “hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things.”^[12] For Barber and for many hearing his message, Du Bois's attribution of the power of “breath” to the sorrow song breathes life into the expression of mourning for those who “cannot breathe,” killed by contagion, violence, and the contagion of violence that exacerbates harm to Black communities around the country, including in Chicago where physicians and community members have worked to treat the contagion of violence as a matter of public health.^[13]

Coda: Returning and Restoring

Chicago protests (June 2020). Photo: David Graver

Even if *A Maze in Grace* has at the time of writing in May 2021 not yet circulated much beyond São Paulo, this experiment entwining prayer and protest echoed in my ears as demonstrations erupted in many cities in the U.S. and around the world, in immediate response to the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020, and resonated

again at the end of 2020 in Rev. Barber's Mourning Christmas message, calling for sorrow and justice in song and deed. Chicago, although more than a thousand kilometers from the Atlantic, is connected to the ocean by canals linking the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River, and thus to the routes of African diaspora. The descendants of forced migrants who were pulled from ships at Charleston and other ports from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, followed the railroad to Chicago in the twentieth, creating with this Great Migration a city within a city that mid-century sociologists/auto-ethnographers called *Black Metropolis* (Drake and Cayton). More than half a century later, Black Americans who led marches in Chicago and other cities in 2020 were protesting ongoing police violence most immediately as well as the long history of structural violence embedded in the planned inequity of housing, healthcare and other social goods. In the summer of 2020, the main site of protest was not the Black South Side but instead the wealthy center, where political protest on the street was followed by less obviously political acts of looting and other damage to property, to which the Black mayor responded by raising the nineteenth-century bridges that link the city center with surrounding districts across the three branches of the Chicago River. This tactic created a stage that could be turned into a cage enabling police to corral and arrest protesters and bystanders alike.^[14] The police followed the mass arrests with charges of violence and used these charges to place protestors in home confinement under surveillance by radio embedded in ankle cuffs, even as the trials that could exonerate these protestors continue to be postponed.^[15]

Chicago mayor responds to protests by raising the bridges
(June 2020). Photo: David Graver

Chicago's famously cold winter brought quieter streets, but the protests continued into 2021 in a lower key, evoking historical precedents linking pandemic and violence, in particular harking back to 1919 and the summer between the two winter waves of the influenza pandemic. In that hot summer, a Black swimmer, who had drifted over the invisible boundary between segregated stretches of the Chicago lakefront, drowned possibly because whites threw rocks at him, and after police refused to arrest the alleged perpetrators, Black protests prompted white gangs to attack the rights of any and all Blacks in the city (Drake and Cayton 65–76). A century later, in 2019, Chicago scholar-poet Eve Ewing stressed the riot's "indelible mark on the city, its sense of boundaries, of relationships between neighbors, of fear and mistrust were cemented for a century to come" (70). Her poem this legacy "Countless Schemes" draws on an early study of the riot, *The Negro in Chicago* (1923) and on other studies from *Black Metropolis* (1945) to the present of the violence that Blacks have endured in America since slavery, including nineteenth century "schemes" to dispatch freed people "back" to Africa, despite their American birthright,

you don't have enough boats
we came here head to toe
and now we are millions

but the vivid evocation of “boats” reminds the present-day reader that the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas cannot be reversed: African Americans are here to stay. The poem concludes by unwriting another “scheme” that allegedly promised white “hope for a solution through the dying out of the Negro race,”

you said hope for dying
 hope dying
 dying
 dying
 you said hope.

79–80^[16]

Rewriting dying as hope, the poem ends on a prayerful protest note. The text on the page permits silent reading, but these lines resonate between 1919 and 2019 and invite performance, even in confinement, in the spirit of the songs of passage, mourning and protest that have threaded through this essay acknowledging the dead and the living of 2020.

Notes– Links active at the time of writing and are not guaranteed.

Endnotes

[1] The idea of “circum-Atlantic” routes I borrow from Joseph Roach’s influential *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* to highlight not only trade in commodities, including the commodification of enslaved people, but also the complex practices of cultural survival and revival linking Europe, Africa and the Americas in both hemispheres, practices whose trajectories across the South Atlantic challenge the northern bias embedded in “trans-Atlantic.”

[2] On *audiencing* skills and other forms of cultural capital, see Gay Morris. On the history of “concerts,” which have included dramatic sketches as well as singing, see Christopher Ballantine; David Coplan; and Loren Kruger, *A Century of South African Theatre*.

[3] Extracts of *Rewind* from the 2011 revival at the Baxter Theatre, Cape Town; for more footage and commentary, Liza Key’s *Rewind: A Documentary*; and for historical context, see Kruger, *Century*, pp. 163–65.

[4]> Muyanga’s *Revolting Music* and accompanying commentary varies in performances from his studio in March 2015 to São Paulo in 2016. Pan African Space Station (2008–) provides an online platform for pan-African culture including publications and radio; see neosong.net.

[5] South African deaths attributed by the Dept. of Health to COVID-19 numbered around 56,000 as of May 2021, out of a total population of fifty-seven million, but the South African Medical Research Council has argued that the number excess deaths, including those officially attributed to COVID-19 may be higher than 100, 000.

[6] See also Veit Erlmann.

[7] This recording of *Influenza* can be found at Miller's website. This is part of a larger digital recording project in progress called *Reuben Caluza: The B-Side*.

[8] A short extract of the São Paulo performance of *A Maze in Grace* with Muyanga's comments was posted by the Foundation of the 34th Biennale and at the time of writing available here. Shape notation was developed in eighteenth-century England to facilitate community choral singing by giving different shapes to each notehead to allow non-professionals to find the pitch without having to navigate key signatures.

[9] For Magnet Theatre, see Megan Lewis and Anton Krueger; for *Cargo's* engagement with slavery at the Cape, Kruger, *Century*, pp. 187–92.

[10] For the NAF festival, which became an annual event after 1977, see Loren Kruger, "The National Arts Festival in Grahamstown."

[11] NAF managers signaled their esteem for this piece by using its title as the signature of the festival as a whole, promising "12 days of amazing" on its website.

[12] See Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, especially p. 188; Du Bois's "sorrow song" evokes both mourning and subtle resistance more precisely than the Anglo-American noun "spiritual."

[13] The social and infrastructural links between deaths by violence and deaths by contagion prompted physician Gary Slutkin to found the non-governmental organization Cure Violence, in collaboration with former gang members and community elders; see Slutkin, also available here. For the *planned* violence of unequal housing and other forms of discrimination, see Carl Nightingale and Loren Kruger, "White Cities, Black Streets."

[14] For an analysis of how Chicago mayor Lori Lightfoot turned the "city's infrastructure into a weapon against protesters," see Maya Dukmasova.

[15] For the exemplary case of Chicago rapper-poet Mohawk Johnson, see Leor Galil.

[16] Ewing quotes failed "schemes" mentioned in the report by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, p. xxiii.

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The most relevant for this issue are *A Century of South African Theatre* (Methuen, 2019); "Glocal South Sides: Race, Capital and Performing Against Injustice," *Theatre Journal* (2020); and "Performance, Politics and Historiography in and out of Time: American Responses to the Paris Commune," *Pamiętnik Teatralny* (2021, forthcoming). She has edited special issues for *Theatre Journal* and *Theatre Research International* and is Professor of Comparative and English Literature, African Studies, and Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Chicago.