

# *Collective Amnesia*, by Koleka Putuma

uHlanga Press. 2017. pp. 110.  
ISBN: 978-0-620-73508-7

## Reviewed by Hlumela Mpiti

University Currently Known as Rhodes, South Africa  
nokutula27@gmail.com

Koleka Putuma's debut poetry collection, *Collective Amnesia*, speaks of a collective sense of forgetting. We see from the highly performative cover page—where a black girl, masked in black clothing, sits in the darkness carrying a white doll and is only in slight contact with the light that shines from behind her—that this collection is layered and speaks to multiple themes. Because ideas of “unlearning” are so prevalent in the collection, readers can further interpret this cover as an allusion to *Collective Amnesia* bringing us closer to the light.

Throughout the collection, Putuma writes of her personal, and often resonating observations of the collective wounds that the colonial legacy has inflicted on South Africans as well as other colonised peoples. The collection depicts historical injustices such as racial discrimination, homophobia, femicide and epistemic violence. It not only criticises the oppressions that we, as colonised people, have faced, but also our silence towards and complicity in them. According to Sassen (2019), Putuma's work stands out as a centrepiece, tackles uncomfortable conversations and has a certain tone attached to it that cannot be shrugged off. Putuma challenges and highlights hierarchical structures of “race”, gender, heteropatriarchy and classism that continue to dominate how we navigate life, knowledge systems and spirituality (Sassen 2019). She is able to do this through exploring issues of blackness, womxnhood, history, memory, belonging and many others.

Through poems such as “Storytelling”, Putuma reminds us that we—colonised black people—remember, archive and inherit the world through told and heard stories. This is a reminder not to take for granted the value of navigating the world on our terms, based on our knowledges. Pieterse (2018) explains this process of “delinking” as an understanding of our experiences from our own perspective. In studies of our history,



UNISA  
Education as Change  
<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/EAC>  
Volume 24 | 2020 | #8839 | 5 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/8839>  
ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)  
© The Author(s) 2020



Published by the University of Johannesburg and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

we foreground our own voices when we authentically engage with our individual experiences and share them with the world. We create sites of cultural production and dissemination for new or alternative forms of knowledge that might not be accommodated by mainstream literature (Pieterse 2018). *Collective Amnesia* is one such site.

The collection is divided into three segments centred on memory: “Inherited Memory”, “Buried Memory” and “Post Memory”. In these, Putuma explores the nuances and complexities of memory. Some of her common reflections include the ways in which what we know and remember are passed down, how the successive generations remember and bear the collective trauma of the generations before them, and how some parts of memory are better off hidden or simply not spoken about. Putuma reminds us of our happy childhood memories, but also highlights how our stories of pain and protest are seemingly the only ones that are interesting enough to occupy history books. Poems such as “Hand-me-downs” and “Black Joy” (both of which are in the section “Inherited Memory”) explicitly explore experiences of happiness for many black children growing up in South Africa. In “Black Joy”, Putuma (2017, 12–13) writes:

But  
 isn't it funny?  
 That when they ask about black childhood,  
 all they are interested in is our pain,  
 as if the joy-parts were accidental.

*Collective Amnesia* demonstrates the multiple ways in which black, African histories and knowledges have been misrepresented and how these misrepresentations have been memorialised, deliberately passed down and even embodied by black Africans themselves. This continuing colonisation of knowledge, erasure of black histories and forgetting by black people can be seen in poems such as “In the Classroom”. In the poem, Putuma writes: “The student wants to know:/ why there are more blacks in shebeens and churches/ than there are in museums or commemoration sites?” (86). This poem, like many others, not only interrogates those on the privileged side of colonisation but also forces colonised people to acknowledge their complicity in perpetuating colonial and oppressive systems.

Since Putuma is confronting weighty topics, it is fitting that the style of writing she uses to address these issues is so courageous. She is able to discuss personal and political issues of memory, lived experiences, identity and belonging with great boldness. Much of the boldness exists in statements that hold a multiplicity of meaning. Moreover, her courage is noticeable in the structure of her poems: they have an experimental nature that challenges conventional poetic forms. For example, her poem, “Lifeline”, can initially be read as a mere list of names of black womxn. However, in this list lies the names of people who are just as committed as she to the work of black justice. The poem is a list of people who inspire Putuma to continue living and working. Poems such as this one do not read like poems at all. Putuma acknowledges and deliberately plays

on this. Close to the end of “Lifeline” she writes: “you will say that this is not a poem/ and I will say that you are right:/ it is not./ it is a lifeline” (2017, 85). The reader realises that the work the poems do is more important than subscribing to any poetic conventions. She does not adhere to any specific line length or stanza format. The poem “Apartheid” consists entirely of the footnote, “A genocide that can be still be found in the township” (2017, 109). This taut political statement reflects how the impact of many apartheid policies such as the Group Areas Act (1950) remains largely unchanged in contemporary South Africa; a sentiment and a reality that resonate with most township dwellers.

Putuma’s defiance is evident both in her use of language and in the spine-chillingly beautiful content of her work. Although she speaks of her own experiences—this is seen by her use of personal pronouns throughout the collection—the black South African reader is still able to find resonance because she writes of typical black South African experiences. For instance, in “Graduation”, she notes: “You and your cousins will do the things your aunties used to do/ Your baby cousins who are not babies anymore/ Will sit and drink ciders with you/ Talking sense finally” (2017, 36). The poem depicts experiences of growing up, how we, as black South Africans, inherit more responsibilities, and how we get to sit-in on family discussions and understand the dynamics of family a bit more once we take on those responsibilities.

The poem “No Easter Sunday for Queers” interrogates religious dogmatism as well as sexuality that defies heteronormativity. One of her most touching and moving poems, it has recently been turned into a play with the same title. The play, directed by Mwenya Kabwe, who worked alongside the talented MoMo Matsunyane, Tshego Khutsoane and Lunga Radebe as the main cast members, debuted at the Market Theatre in August 2019. Mwenya Kabwe and Momo Matsunyane are listed in her poem, “Lifelines”. Thus, it is extremely fitting that Putuma chose to work with these womxn.<sup>1</sup>

In both the play and the poem, Putuma writes about existing between and trying to navigate different, and often contradicting, worlds—the “North”/ “Northern Suburbs” and the “South”/ “Southern Suburbs” (2017, 25–33) as well as the church and home. Reading “No Easter Sunday for Queers” is difficult because of Putuma stuttering between “Us/them”, “the South/ “the North”, and “my/ our”. In the poem, she does not know where she belongs. The complexities and tensions are reflected in her not being able to situate herself, as is evident in her use of pronouns: she frequently writes “They/We” or strikes out “we” to replace it with “they” in the same line. With regard to structure, as soon as the reader begins understanding life in “the South”, there is a sudden shift to life in “the North”. In both the poem and play text, Putuma goes back and forth in this way, creating a jarring reading experience. The form of the poem and play text, with interspersed italics, capital letters, strikethroughs and very long lines, prevents a comfortable reading experience. The unsettling experience translates into an

---

<sup>1</sup> The play, *No Easter Sunday for Queers*, was published in 2020 by Junkets Publishers.

unsettling form of writing, which in turn unsettles the reader. The reader is often left not knowing *how* to read. Her unconventional, experimental style has a performative nature, reflecting her rich background in theatre.

In “No Easter Sunday for Queers”, Putuma critiques homophobia and different forms of intolerance, violence and fear experienced by queer people—particularly black queer womxn—in different spaces (ideological and geographical) in South Africa. She rewrites biblical stories to include queer love. In “Water” (2017, 98–99) she boldly writes:

For all we know,  
the disciplines could have been queer,  
the Holy Trinity some weird, twisted love triangle,  
And the Holy Ghost transgender.

This début poetry collection has been an international success: it has sold over 5 000 copies, it has had 17 launches across South Africa, and it has been translated into German, Spanish, Italian and Danish. Putuma has performed it across three continents. Her truth and words resonate in the short poem, “Memoirs of a Slave and Queer Person”, which reads: “I don’t want to die with my hands up or my legs open”. This is one of Putuma’s most repeated lines of protest and is currently used when people mobilise in marches and on social media against sexual assault.

Dudzile Mabaso (2018) describes the volume as follows:

Koleka Putuma’s *Collective Amnesia* is shifting borders. It is a collection of work that is needed and necessary—now more than ever. It is a manual for black bodies. An ode to the spaces we occupy. A hymnal for the weary. A celebration of self. A great collection if you ask me.

This is one of the many positive reviews that point towards the riveting content that Putuma delivers with courage; it acknowledges how she shamelessly speaks her truth and does not make it prettier for anyone by altering her language or hiding in the shadows.

## References

Sassen, R. 2019. “Blemished Church, Broken Lesbians”. *My View: The Arts At Large by Robyn Sassen and Other Writers* (blog), August 22. Accessed on May 4, 2020. Accessed December 19, 2020. <https://robysassenmyview.com/2019/08/22/blemished-church-broken-lesbians/>.

Mabaso, Duduzile Zamantungwa. 2018. Review of *Collective Amnesia* by Koleka Putuma. *Poetry Potion*, April 24. Accessed August 2, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.poetrypotion.com/book-review-collective-amnesia-by-koleka-putuma/>.

Pieterse, A. 2018. "Knowledge and Unlearning in the Poetry of Koleka Putuma and Sindiswa Busuku-Mathese". *Scrutiny* 23 (1): 35–46.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/18125441.2018.1505937>.