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LEARNING TO UNLEARN
Koleka Putuma's Poetry and Performances

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Abstract – The aim of this article is to discuss some works of the South African poet, theatre practitioner, playwright, performer, feminist, and queer activist Koleka Putuma. The article's main focus will be some poems from Putuma's collection *Collective Amnesia* (2017), now a bestseller in South Africa. *Collective Amnesia* is the point of both arrival and departure of different kinds of art, such as poetry performances, video productions, and theatre plays. Putuma's poems deal with historical issues and memory/ies, in particular with slavery and with the repressed presence of black women in South African history. By questioning the past and the way its narration registers and/or erases memories, Putuma produces a decolonial counter-discourse which conceives art as a political practice, that is a form of *art*ivism, whereby notions of identities are complicated and extended rather than standardised and circumscribed. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality (1989), this article will show how in Putuma's works borders and boundaries – in terms of gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, class, economic status, etc. – come to the fore in order to allow new and more flexible paradigms with which to narrate post-transitional South Africa. Many of the discourses emerging from her written as well as performed/filmed works promote a re-appropriation of black women's bodies while endorsing their empowerment, also through a collective *unlearning*, a fundamental process if one wants to rewrite history/ies from female, feminist, and queer perspectives.

Keywords: Koleka Putuma; South African women poetry; post-transitional South Africa; artivism; black feminism.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to shed light on some works of the South African poet, theatre practitioner, playwright, performer, feminist, and queer Cape-Town based artist/activist, from now on *artivist*,[1] Koleka Putuma (Port Elizabeth, 1993). Putuma's first collection of poems, *Collective Amnesia*, unexpectedly became a bestseller in the South African printing industry market in 2017, when it came out thanks to the efforts of an independent publishing house, uHlanga Press, which issued it with a small budget in a very limited number of copies. In spite of the difficulties poetry books usually meet in reaching wide audiences and in making it into the South African book-market, *Collective*

[1] I here use this term according to how it is discussed in Serafini (2018).

Amnesia sold more than 6,000 copies in less than two years, a figure that has more than doubled by now, and, while being the recipient of many prestigious awards, including some hardly ever assigned to poetry before (such as the Standard Bank Young Artist Award, won in 2022), it is currently in its 12th print run.[2]

Although there has been an amazing rise in women's publication across Africa in the new millennium (see Xaba 2019, p. 18), the case of Putuma stands out for its exceptionality. *Collective Amnesia*'s poems have travelled the world (and the web) with their author in performances and public readings. Translated into seven European languages (the eighth, Italian, is forthcoming), the collection is now a prescribed text in secondary schools and university *sillabi* in South Africa. This is an outstanding achievement in a country where black poetry in general and black women poetry in particular were never included in school *curricula*. It goes without saying that Putuma's collection is also the object of national and international academic research. The popularity of *Collective Amnesia*'s poems, as a matter of fact, has also rocketed the political arena, and in massive demonstrations against gender based violence such as the Total Shut Down march held in August 2018 throughout many Southern African countries, Putuma's lines – "I don't want to die with my hands up or legs open" (Putuma 2020a, p. 77)[3] – were quoted on banners next to other feminist slogans. As Chelsea Haith has pointed out, *Collective Amnesia* has pushed the margins into the mainstream and managed to become a *cultural object* itself in the multifaceted popular culture of post-transitional South Africa (Haith 2018, p. 46).

Due to their uncompromising and outspoken ethical and political commitment, Putuma's works have also attracted negative reactions. During the 2015 TEDxStellenbosch event, part of the (mostly white) audience showed resentment at her performance of *Water* to the point that the organisers later awkwardly asked the artivist the permission not to upload that part of her presentation.[4] A minority of dissenting but very aggressive comments can also be read, amid a flood of enthusiastic ones, below some of her videos online. Putuma's artivism hits many raw nerves and shows that there is the necessity to rethink, indeed, a number of yet unsorted issues in today's South Africa.

Nothing for Putuma's artivism is beyond or above criticism, including some spectacular accomplishments achieved by the country after the end of apartheid such as Nelson Mandela's iconic presidency (1994-1999), the Truth

[2] After the first printings with uHlanga, *Collective Amnesia* was re-published in 2020 in a new edition under Putuma's own company, Manyano Media. All the quotations in this article are from this edition.

[3] Putuma titled this very short poem "Memoirs of a Slave & Queer Person", unveiling a link between slavery and homophobia.

[4] *Water* was thereafter included in *Collective Amnesia*. For Koleka Putuma's open letter to the TEDxStellenbosch's organisers, see Word N Sound Live Literature Movement (2015).

and Reconciliation Commission (1996-1998), or the South African Constitution (1996), where in Section 9(3) of Chapter 2 (Bill of Rights) one can read:

> The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth. (*Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* 1996)

Impeccable in its formulation, this provision often finds no tangible validations in the daily life of the majority of South Africans, who experience intersected forms of discrimination that highlight the gap between proclamations and reality. It is a hiatus that maintains and produces old and new minorities showing, as the South African writer and performer Lebogang Mashile has recently remarked, that apartheid's legacy is still very much conditioning South Africa despite this enlightened constitution (Mashile 2019, p. 220).

Putuma's engagement expands beyond her personal artistic performances. In 2019, she founded Manyano Media, a multidisciplinary creative company that "aims to create a counter-archive which disrupts and reimagines narratives about black and queer women on and off stage" (*Manyano Media* 2023). With a view to supporting black and queer women storytellers in South Africa, Manyano Media also promotes a yearly Black Girl Live Fellowship to help women implement their creative projects by providing them with mentors, access to professional networks, and spaces for the development of their ideas. To put it in other words, in a country where every three hours a woman is murdered, where 'corrective rape' of queer individuals is a widespread hate crime, and where the female body enjoys centrality and hypervisibility only vis-à-vis tragedy, Manyano Media encourages and supports new forms of (positive) artistic (re)actions to this largely overlooked or, at least, never seriously tackled crisis.

2. Re-focusing on black women's bodies

A collection of poems with a coherent articulation of its own, *Collective Amnesia* is also the point of both arrival and departure of other forms of art such as endless poetry performances; *Water*, a video production directed by Ecuadorian José Cardoso featuring Putuma herself and released one year before the collection came out; another solo version of *Water* published in 2019 with photographs by Noncedo Gxekwa; a much acclaimed theatre play, *No Easter Sunday for Queers*, staged for the first time at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg in 2019 and published as an independent text in 2021, etc. Each one of these different productions offers new readings of its versatile author:

in the way her words interact with the many non-verbal features of her works (colours, lights, soundtracks, images, music, filming and editing, costumes, paraphernalia, etc.) and/or according to how her gestures, voice, silences, comments, jokes, laughter, sighs, breathing, etc. help to shape her live performances.[5]

Following the success of *Collective Amnesia*, in 2021 Putuma published a second collection of poems titled *Hullo, Bu-Bye, Koko, Come In*[i], where she continues to experiment with the language and formal structures of poetry, amplifying her perspective from *Collective Amnesia*'s ultimate South African focus to a broader one, enriched by her recent travels in Northern Europe. *Hullo, Bu-Bye, Koko, Come In*[i] delves into many of the issues at the heart of *Collective Amnesia*, in particular the invisibility of black people/women's stories and bodies. Indicating the perspective and purpose of the whole collection, its opening poem, "THIS IS NOT A DRILL", begins as follows:

> for those of us
> whose lives are placed adjacent
> next to/or somewhere
> where the microscope
> cannot find us
> cannot locate where the story begins
> cannot write our stories without tragedy
> (Putuma 2021a, p. 13)

It may be useful here to point out the anaphora that signals an impossibility ("cannot") related to space and mapping ("find" and "locate") and that ends up affecting the act of writing itself. Like *Collective Amnesia*, also *Hullo, Bu-Bye, Koko, Come In*[i] gathers new and previously published/performed/filmed works such as the gripping poem "Every / Three Hours", which came out in print for the first time in 2019 in the *Johannesburg Review of Books* and travelled the country in Putuma's even more suggestive video *The Poet Protesting Femicide in South Africa* (2020), realised by the artivist for a massive national campaign against violence on women and homophobia.

Putuma's engagement with multimediality and multimodality should be read as a decolonial practice which aims to undermine the power of the (exclusively) written word as it is understood in Western epistemology. Her texts, whether they are on paper, read and/or performed live or recorded, reveal how urgent issues can surface from silence to overlap, intersect, friction together in an (un)balanced scenario which is always different, always moving from and going to new experiences, both for the artivist and for her audience/readers.

A questioning attitude towards the practice of archiving, a multimodal approach to art, a queer focus on the intertwining of history and religion, a

[5] Some of Putuma's performances can be watched online on her website (see *Koleka Putuma* 2021).

special attention to how colonial discourses and postures are still very much at work in post-transitional South Africa, and a consistent challenge to the concept and practices of memory and remembering, especially when it comes to black women bodies' erasure or hypersexualisation, are some of the key factors at the core of Putuma's work. This change of focus aimed at re-positioning black women's bodies is a decolonial practice Putuma shares with many colleagues from new and old generations alike, such as Sindiwe Magona, Makhosazana Xaba, Lebogang Mashile, Malika Ndlovu, Natalia Molebatsi, Yvette Christiansë, etc. (see Boswell 2016, p. 11). Drawing on both *slam poetry* and the Black canon (Toni Morrison, Steve Biko, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Sello Duiker are but some of the references surfacing from her texts) and relying on previous theatre training, Putuma forges an experimental lyrical world that disputes normative versions of South African identities based on white and/or black hetero-patriarchal history.

The poem "Lifeline", in *Collective Amnesia*, writes back to an exclusively male canon suggesting the existence of a female one. The poem lists – without comments, descriptions, or introductions – sixty-eight names of black women (young, old, middle-aged, queer, heterosexual, dead, alive, rich, poor, average, iconic, less known, etc.) who were/are active in different fields ranging from art to law and politics. These names constitute Putuma's personal universe of artistic, political, ethical references. Addressed like many of her poems to an explicit "you", here slightly perceived like an antagonist, "Lifeline" switches to a new addressee (the black girl) in its final lines. The use of italics stresses how *vital* the acknowledgement of this black female canon/lifeline is, not only for aesthetic reasons but also for young women's empowerment and for their physical survival in a (still) very hostile and misogynistic environment:

> you will say that this is not a poem
> and I will say that you are right:
> it is not.
>
> it is a lifeline.
>
> every name
> is a gospel shut up in my bones.
> every name
> chants
> *Black girl -*
> *Live!*
> *Live!*
> *Live!*
> (Putuma 2020a, p. 87)

The success of Putuma's poetry is quite unexpected in a context shaped and dominated by male ideology: one which is both a legacy of colonialism and a feature of the mainstream current political, cultural, and social practices of post-transitional South Africa. Many poems in *Collective Amnesia* offer images of toxic relationships women should get out of. This is the case of "In the Emergency Room", in which the hidden presence of violence within a domestic environment comes to the fore:

> Things you don't tell your family:
>
> Your marriage was a miscarriage.
> He almost killed you.
>
> But you stayed
> *for the children,*
> you said.
> (Putuma 2020a, p. 68)

In the above lines, one can perceive an intimate relationship between the lyrical voice and the addressee ("you") to the point that the two might overlap and merge one into the other, as if the poetic persona were speaking to herself. The internal rhyme and the acoustic similarity between the words "marriage" and "miscarriage" throw a sinister light on the line "*for the children*" (highlighted by the use of italics), letting the reader wonder about their survival (and that of the woman who "stayed") in a context of domestic violence which includes an attempted murder and a violence-induced abortion.

A broader criticism, where private and public spheres mix and the lyrical voice speaks both as a mother (in italics) and as a comrade, can be found in "On Black Solidarity", a long poem presented as a double list, by numbers and by ball points. The formal rigidity of the structure mimics the inflexibility of commonplaces about unity and solidarity within black communities, a positive but unrealistic depiction that here Putuma challenges (2020a, p. 83):

> 7. *Give me one rapper I can trust my son's ear with.*
> *Give me one lyric I can trust my daughter's image with.*
>
> 8. • You want black womxn's bodies on the line.
> • Not the frontline.
> • You endorse intersectionality.
> • But not at the expense of your praise and visibility.
>
> 9. Terms and conditions of your solidarity:
> • No feminism
> • Limited feminism
> • No feminism that exposes patriarchy
> • No feminism that disturbs patriarchy
> • Only feminism that will show up with pompoms

No matter how much (black) men can call themselves *feminist*, patriarchy remains unaffected, as stanza 9 shows by listing some ironical "terms and conditions" that would secure the liberalist agenda described and contested in stanza 8. The obsessive repetition of the word "feminism" and the slight adjustments made around it line after line ("no" / "limited"; "exposes" / "disturbs") in stanza 9 create a crescendo that flows in the ironic conclusion portraying a domesticated feminism with fluffy balls, thereby ridiculing the whole (male) hypocrite reasoning behind it.

It is not common to find such a frank black-on-black criticism in South African literature. During apartheid, black men's violence and abuse on their female counterparts, whether in the struggle, at work, in the streets or at home, were silenced because there was a more important battle to fight; internal 'disputes' should not break the front, and "defensive priorities", as Kimberlé Crenshaw calls such instances, prevailed (Crenshaw 1989, p. 162). Despite that, some South African literary icons such as Miriam Tlali (1933-2017) – one of the names listed in "Lifeline" – were brave enough to unveil in their writings a taboo which was destined to remain, though, largely unacknowledged until recently. Putuma's attack comes from her tireless commitment in the South African campaigns against violence on women and femicides. "On Black Solidarity" is a particularly defying poem because it discloses a widespread culture of gender discriminations that takes for granted women as objects, often sexual objects (as in many rap songs), creating that ground where they are hit, silenced, underestimated. Putuma is keen in underlining that there is a heavy responsibility and a double loss in all this, and addressing black men she writes:

> 6. • Your solidarity, it seems, is anchored by undermining black womxn's struggle.
> • Tell it to wait.
> • Tell it to stop dividing black people.
> (Putuma 2020a, p. 83).

3. Decolonising the archive

Collective Amnesia is composed by forty-eight poems of different length, divided into three sections titled *Inherited Memory*, *Buried Memory* and *Postmemory*. Five poems in particular catch the eye because they consist only of a title and a short footnote, respectively placed on top and at the bottom of an empty page. The absence of the main text acts, in part, as a silent comment on the marginalisation of the questions raised by the titles and briefly explained in the glosses. Significantly, *Collective Amnesia*'s opening poem is one of those. Titled "Storytelling", it brings to mind oral traditions and their weight in the transmission of memories. Its footnote reads: "How my people remember. How my people archive. How we inherit the world" (Putuma

2020a, p. 14). Putuma has often stressed the importance of memories passed down from one generation to the other, and how this influences the way we are in the world (see Putuma, Pedersen 2022). "Storytelling"'s anaphoric footnote suggests that there is, possibly, a correction to be made about archives. The blank space between title and footnote is both waiting to be filled and indicating an aporia, as not everyone archives the past in the same way. How do we store oral stories? Does their absence from material archives and writing mean that they do not exist? The poems coming after "Storytelling", then, partially fill that gap in the archive unlocking doors, providing new perspectives – "from which point do we want to see the world?" (Putuma, Pedersen 2022) –, offering new stories from scratch or complicating old tales by providing details that did not get enough attention, were silenced, could not be recorded, or went deliberately unregistered.

Artists' creative power can be more effective than the work of historians in places where sources are unwritten, scarce, or dubious. As Barbara Boswell has remarked, "[r]e-memoring is often a mode of engagement with history's *lacunae* for postcolonial artists" (Boswell 2016, p. 13). Personal memories and a more inclusive idea of history can make all the difference. Re-memoring and re-membering via storytelling also constitute a healing process as "[s]tories create meaning for our memories and enable us as African people to unlearn the lessons of traumatic experiences" (Williams, Molebatsi 2019, p. 103). Artistic experiences produce growth also through *subtraction*: a crucial and unexpected step to achieve different frameworks within which the (traumatised) individual can more comfortably fit in and, if he/she/they wants, finally move on.

Inherited Memory, the section opened by "Storytelling", coherently includes poems dealing with community life and childhood memories in the aftermath of the end of apartheid. It is a sort of autobiographical coming-of-age chapter, which comprises poems about the process of growing up in a humble but not necessarily unhappy environment ("Black Joy"), about the awareness of the oppressive role played by religion and the Church both from the viewpoint of race ("Growing Up Black & Christian") and of gender ("No Easter Sunday for Queers"), about family relationships ("Aviophobia"), about how differently old and new generations cope (or do not cope) with major and minor traumas ("Graduation"), about the joy of sex ("Coming Home"), about love relationships that fatally end because they simply do not work ("Twenty-one Ways of Leaving", "Promised Land").

Putuma contests the artistic portrayal of black children's suffering – the "poverty porn" (Haith 2018, p. 42) – and of black adults only depicted while protesting at the expenses of lines that could easily engage with their joyful memories and moments. Perceiving herself as one of those misrepresented kids and later young adults, in "Black Joy" she offers scattered memories about her childhood: its games and little misdemeanours, eating and sleeping with

friends, neighbours and cousins. The poem finally switches from the apposition of the plural pronouns we/they (blacks/non-blacks) to the singular I/you (poet/white reader or readers)[6] and ends with a synecdoche whereby the poet is indicated by her shouting mouth which, via simile, reinforces the concept of *pain* through the displeasing picture of a suppurating wound:

> We were home and whole.
>
> 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.
>
> I write love poems too,
> but
> you only want to see my mouth torn open in protest,
> as if my mouth were a wound
> with pus and gangrene
> for joy.
> (Putuma 2020a, pp. 15-16)

Collective Amnesia also digs through repressed/forgotten memories, identities, and histories: suppressed because they did not fit it, or because they belonged to minorities cut off from the unifying rhetoric of the Rainbow Nation, in spite of the multiple nature this was meant to evoke. Retrieving these parts of South African memories, identities, histories through art, whether written or performed, constitutes an act of restoring; to use some eloquent lines from Putuma's second collection of poems:

> let us begin:
>
> writing
> as it was
> as it is
> is how we exhume
> the bodies
> and give them
> names.
> (Putuma 2021a, p. 14)

It is a *secular* process of baptising and resurrecting at a time multiple pasts that needs artivism to be accomplished; a process that constitutes a decolonial aesthetics whereby unrepresented identities and realities acquire depth because they are named, read, seen, told, acknowledged, performed for the first time.

[6] Interpreting *you* as a plural pronoun here would not substantially alter the outcome.

As Annel Pieterse, drawing from Walter Mignolo, has rightly remarked, it means thinking in terms of *enunciation* rather than *representation*, inventing rather than describing; such a process needs to start from the practice of de-linking oneself from colonial (and postcolonial) forced identifications (Pieterse 2018, p. 37).

If it is true that forgiving and forgetting are important steps in overcoming South Africa's violent and undemocratic past, it is equally true that, as with all traumas, one needs to know what to forget, which makes the act of remembering a *prerequisite* for a healthy process of archiving. In spite of the many efforts to deal with the past, among which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission stands out, parts of South African history fell victim to collective amnesia because they did not fit in with 'official' representations of reality. Many stories never surfaced from the past, some were and are still overcelebrated, while others are remembered in selective and detrimental ways. Putuma's post-transitional discourse rejects "the notion of the nation as a cohesive rainbow" (Haith 2018, p. 42) and underlines, at times with sharp irony, the lack of both redistribution of wealth and compensation for the damages suffered without which reconciliation remains impracticable. One of the five poems made of title and footnote only is called "Apartheid" and its gloss reads: "A genocide that can still be found in township" (Putuma 2020a, p. 112). Such a statement is in line with the position of all those young people, including Putuma, for whom apartheid is *postmemory* and who are very critical about South Africa's post-transition. But there is no way out and one has to go back, as *Collective Amnesia* does, to the country's past in order to understand its present shortcomings. Overwhelmed by a myriad of private tales and versions of its history during the immediate post-apartheid, eager to overcome the pains and faults, but also forced to see the glass half full, maybe South Africa was not really ready to archive its past in the 1990s. Although this is a very tricky issue and a slippery ground, one has to admit that too many nasty experiences could not realistically disappear so quickly behind the rainbow.

In the last poem of *Collective Amnesia*, "Afterlife", the unsolved issues of South African transition, such as the relationship between truth and reconciliation, are 'loudly' spoken out:

> hell
> will be the graves of our forefathers turned inside-out
> to revenge the truth
>
> what did you expect,
> living in a haunted house
> and calling yourself free or pardoned?
>
> tell them Hallelujah sounds like

black people
burping:
JUSTICE!
JUSTICE!
JUSTICE!
JUSTICE!
JUSTICE!
JUSTICE!
(Putuma 2020a, p. 114)

The evocations of the country as a haunted house and of a freedom/pardon possibly too easily granted are followed by the 'indecent' simile that compares the spiritual utterance "Hallelujah" to the bodily sound of a burp. Saying "Hallelujah" to the forefathers would be insulting if the word, according to the religious context of its origin, indicates regeneration. The benefit of a *symbolic* resurrection did not concern such people, because the black community has not enjoyed any reconciliation with the past, nor has it ever been *materially* compensated for the losses suffered. Consequently, the word "Justice" – written in capital letters and followed by an exclamation mark – emerges, undigested, from the innermost part of the dead black body to grow on the page, repeated six times, as a chant, as a louder and louder cry. Its reiteration via rising size and gradually increasing indentation also produces the optical effect of movement. Since this is the last word of the whole collection, its significance cannot go unnoticed. Speaking of sin and hell, the poem plays with the abstract, religious concepts that animated the South African post-apartheid reconciliation – it is useful to remember here that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was after all chaired by an archbishop – but it seems to refer to a pragmatic 'afterlife' that has more to do with the actual country and with an *earthly* justice than with a theological, intangible Afterworld and its *divine* justice.

4. The memory of water

The poem that engages with historical repression the most in *Collective Amnesia* is "Water" from the section called *Postmemory*, one of Putuma's most famous works to date thanks to its many live performances and José Cardoso's popular short film (InZync Jiráfica, 2016).[7] The text consists of about a

[7] InZync Jiráfica is a network born from the collaboration between InZync Poetry, a non-profit organisation that promotes South African Cape multimodal and multilingual poetry performances, and Jiráfica, a nomadic film production company operating in Spanish-speaking countries and

hundred lines and, once again, personal and collective memories overlap, alternate, and mix together.

"Water" begins with the lyrical first-person's recollection of New Year's Eve at the seaside when she was a kid and the elders would forbid children to play underwater among waves. What would normally be considered a ban based on common sense acquires, though, a different meaning as the poem progresses:

> How the elders would forbid us from going in too deep
> to giggle, to splash in our black tights
> and Shoprite plastic bags wrapped around our new weaves,
> forbid us from riding the wave
> for fear we would be a mass of blackness swept by the tide
> and never to return,
> like litter.
> (Putuma 2020a, p. 98)

The "mass of blackness swept by the tide and never to return, like litter" can be easily read as a metaphor for slavery, today one of the most disputed repressions in South African history. At the crossroads between the Atlantic and Indian oceans, South Africa was often the final destination of a Southern sea-route dislocating and trading enslaved people from East Africa, Madagascar, Mauritius, Zanzibar and later on from Malaysia, India and even China: a route that was navigated for centuries, that involved women in particular, and one that is only recently getting the same scholarly attention hitherto reserved for the "Black Atlantic".[8]

According to Kerry Ward and Nigel Worden, the lack of a South African slave narrative and of physical places dedicated to the memory of enslaved people have encouraged many forms of amnesia in the country (Ward, Worden 2008, p. 202). If places of remembrance and commemoration, national sites and monuments are needed to give tangibility to memory and history, water resists human manipulation and becomes, instead, the *metaphor* of suppressed pasts, as Bibi Burger has underlined in discussing Putuma's work (Burger 2020, p. 35). "Water" challenges the amnesia surrounding slavery by re-formulating the ocean as historical a fabric as the earth. The sea is simultaneously a place of transit and of death (therefore also a grave), a material and a spiritual site. In order to accept this multiple, porous, different version of water, one must first get rid of the meanings it had/has for white people. First of all, one needs, as Isabel Hofmeyr puts it, to "decolonize the ocean" starting from acknowledging "the relations of power that have been

South Africa. It is not possible in this article to discuss both the written poem and the video at length; therefore, my analysis will be limited to some aspects of both works.

[8] See, in particular, Hofmeyr (2007, 2019) and Badeeron (2009).

shaped around water and its colonial appropriation" (Hofmeyr 2019, pp. 12-13) and its subsequent consumerism as a place of fun for white people:

> They mock us
> for not being able to throw ourselves into something that was instrumental in
> trying to execute our extinction.
> For you, the ocean is for surfboards, boats and tans
> and all the cool stuff you do under there in your bathing suits and goggles.
> But we,
> we have come to be baptised here.
> We have come to stir the other world here.
> We have come to cleanse ourselves here.
> We have come to connect our living to the dead here.
> Our respect for water is what you have termed fear.
> The audacity to trade and murder us over water
> then mock us for being scared of it.
> The audacity to arrive by water and invade us.
> (Putuma 2020a, p. 99)

The daughter and granddaughter of ministers, Putuma is familiar with the Holy Scripture and with the combination of text and performance in the mass. Her poetry abounds in religious references and/or allusions. It also relies on some linguistic strategies typical of sermons. In the above lines it is worth underlining the switch from "they" to "you" referring to white people and the rhetorical effect of the plural "we", which first appears after a contrastive conjunction ("but") and then gains emphasis (and agency) via the anaphora "we have come to...". Baptism, the other world, the connection between the living and the dead in the above quoted lines are developed further on in the poem and even more in the video, in which the discussion about Christian symbols takes place in a church where Putuma, whispering, *confesses* with irony that she has always had a troubled relationship with God. The link between Christianity and patriarchy, the former introduced by European missionaries and colonisers, the latter its emanation, goes back to the coming-of-age section of *Collective Amnesia* where, in the poem "Growing up Black & Christian", the guilty association between colonialism and religion is openly denounced:

> The first man
> you are taught to revere
> is a white man.
> [...]
> The gospel
> is how whiteness breaks into our homes
> and brings us to our knees.
> (Putuma 2020a, p. 25)

It is worth underlining here the use of the present tense – "is", "breaks" and "brings" – which highlights an on-going process of subjugation. The fatal bond has produced the cultural asset of the present world, including its racism, gender discrimination, and particularly homophobia.[9] Feminism and queerness cannot but intersect with issues of race in Putuma's incendiary criticism of religion:

> This blue-eyed and blond-haired Jesus I followed in Sunday school
> has had my kind bowing to a white and patriarchal heaven,
> bowing to a Christ, his son, and 12 disciples.
> For all we know,
> the disciples could have been queer,
> the Holy Trinity some weird, twisted love triangle,
> and the Holy Ghost transgender.
> But you will only choose to understand the scriptures that suit your agenda.
> You have taken the liberty to colonize the concept of God;
> gave God a gender, a skin colour,
> and a name in a language we had to twist our mouths around.
> (Putuma 2020a, pp. 100-101)

These lines constitute a sharp attack to a theology historically shaped in such a way as to create exclusions by reinforcing binary notions of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Putuma's ironical interpretation of divine figures according to sexual preferences acts as a challenge that emphasises the erasure, if not the outright condemnation, of LGBTQIA+ individuals by and within the Church. This position is also shared by prominent writers belonging to older generations such as Sindiwe Magona (1943), whose words of comment on the works of the South African non-binary visual artivist Zanele Muholi have similar tones:

> The truth is that binary notions of gender and sexual relationship were enforced by colonial powers. As Donna Smith, former director of Forum for the Empowerment of Women, explains, 'some people believe homosexuality is an idea brought [to Africa] by the white man. But it has always been here. What the white man brought was homophobia clothed in religious doctrine that we did not have before'. (Magona 2020, p. 113)

"Water" celebrates a secular albeit spiritual baptism that could mark a new beginning, here interpreted as a resurrection. In the closing lines historical resentment and reproach for past (and present) violence mix with Biblical

[9] The role played by the Church in gender discrimination and homophobia is the main subject of "No Easter Sunday for Queers", a tragic and at times ironical poem (and then a play) in which the lyrical I is divided between her life in the Northern Suburb (a bigot environment where she, as the daughter of a pastor, is forced to be a closeted lesbian) and her life in the Southern Suburb (the place of politics and protests, of the fight for LGBTQIA+ rights, of queer life, etc.). Misogyny, though, is overspread and at work in both places, as she says: "my body is at the mercy of men" (Putuma 2020a, p. 29).

imagery. In what looks like a possible 'last supper', forgiveness cannot be granted; grief and rage for past deeds are still intoxicating the present and the conversation *has to be* about tough questions possibly never raised before:

> If you really had to write our stories,
> then you ought to have done it in our mothers' tongues,
> the ones you cut off when you fed them a new language.
>
> We never consent.
> Yet we are asked to dine with the oppressors
> and serve them forgiveness.
> How,
> when the only ingredients I have are grief and rage?
>
> Another one (who looks like me) died today.
> Another one (who looks like me) was murdered today.
> May this be the conversation at the table
> and we can all thereafter wash this bitter meal with amnesia.
>
> And go for a swim after that.
> Just for fun.
> Just for fun.
> (Putuma 2020a, pp. 101-102)

It is useful to see how José Cardoso has edited the scenes corresponding to the above lines in the video of *Water* (Cardoso 2016). From the Church setting, where Putuma whispers her rejection of the whites' colonisation of God, the camera blurs the close-up of the poet and switches abruptly to an outdoor scene. We hear Putuma (without seeing her) recite in a city street crowded with people walking. It is an everyday scenario with students just out of school, a protester with a banner against Western imperialism, men and women coming from/going to work or just hanging around. Some briefly stop to watch the camera and the poet we do not see, but they quickly move on. When Putuma utters the first-person pronoun – "when the only ingredients I have are grief and rage" – the camera focuses on her with a medium long shot that highlights her figure – her gaze is fixed on us – and speech. The people around her are now blurry. The exact moment she says the word *amnesia*, the scene returns to the beginning of the video, when Putuma was on a rock by the ocean. From that rock now she recites the last few lines without watching the camera. The video closes on her, silent, walking in the sea, her feet in the seaweed which are briefly shown. The camera focuses on the seaweeds also in some long sequences at the beginning of the video, when Putuma recites offstage:

> Yet every time our skin goes under,
> it's as if the reeds remember that they were once chains,
> and the water, restless, wishes it could spew all of the slaves and ships onto shore,
> whole as they had boarded, sailed and sunk.
> (Putuma 2020a, p. 98)

The abundance of the sibilant 's' in the third line above creates a sound suggesting sweetness in stark contrast with the harshness of the line's meaning; a harshness reiterated in the alliterating juxtaposition of "sailed and sunk" in the following line. A material grave and a symbolic place of remembrance, "Water"'s water can be used by black people for baptism and to wash away resentment, that is, to finally *unlearn* the traces of past traumas so as to be able to enjoy the sea "just for fun". The condition, though, is the "bitter meal",[10] a complicated dialogue that would break the circle José Cardoso sharply stresses by opening and closing the video with the artivist in the same position and in the same sea setting, her feet moving among reeds/chains. A dialogue hitherto evaded.

By putting memory, history, and religion in conversation with each other and with the present, Koleka Putuma unveils the need for a counter-archive where to store what went unrecorded. While in *Collective Amnesia* she contests the inappropriateness of 'material' archives for such a re-memoring, on the other hand, with "Water", she also encourages us to consider this element in its materiality and to let the ocean unfold the stories it has been preserving for centuries.

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[10] Significantly, the Passover meal some claim to be also Christ's last supper included bitter herbs to remind Jewish people of the bitterness of their slavery in Egypt.

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