

# *Collective Amnesia*, by Koleka Putuma.

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The release of Koleka Putuma's debut collection *Collective Amnesia* officially positions her within an ongoing global feminist dialogue with black female poets who utilise poetry as a vehicle to confront their particularised oppressions as womxn<sup>1</sup> of colour. These young writers, be it Somalian Warsan Shire, Indian Rupi Kaur, Sudanese Safia Elhillo, or Jamaican Yrsa Daley-Ward, create new worlds using the magical power of language. Whether it's Rupi Kaur speaking our truth in her poem "Women of Colour", which proclaims: "our backs tell stories no books have the spine to carry"; or Warsan Shire's "In love and In war", which forewarns: "To my daughter I will say, 'when the men come, set yourself on fire'", their searing words give us courage to attend to our own wounds.

Putuma and company, like surgeons, operate on existing discourses around femininity, queer identities, and blackness. The prognosis is unanimous: the world is designed to make invisible the struggles of blackness, of womxnhood, and of queerhood. The pathology is identified: modernity itself is structured on conquest and domination, inherently violent in its natural state, creating hierarchical societies that place the white, male, capitalist, Christian, hetero-patriarch as the supreme default citizen. Everyone else who departs from that identity is an aberration. Putuma's collection examines these aberrations which attend black queer femalehood and its attendant "corrective" violence, with a mathematical precision only lived experience can qualify.

*Collective Amnesia* is structured in three sections: "Inherited Memory", "Buried Memory", and "Postmemory". These centralise memory as a sum total of complex historical processes under colonial Christianity and apartheid, embodied by folk in the lineage, and finding continuity through seemingly

innocuous everyday practices. Putuma positions herself as heir to the traumas that were, in the struggle for survival throughout the ages, consciously or involuntarily unattended and stashed away. This is central to the title of her collection, implying a deficit in memory caused by psychological trauma. In essence, when we experience trauma, our psyches adapt coping mechanisms for our survival. At times, this means the mind has to repress traumatic events, successfully burying them deep in the subconscious. However, these memories are never really obliterated, as the collection shows; they lie latent and tend to surface when triggered by certain life events.

Putuma suggests very explicitly that our amnesia is collective, on the level of the nuclear and extended family, as well as on a national level. The family becomes a microcosm of South Africa, and her body becomes the national body. The poem “Hand-Me-Downs” creates these stark links:

I have inherited a lineage of hand-me-downs.  
 It has made me a mechanic and magician.  
 It has made my bank account a bucket with a hole.  
 Black tax is the water.  
 I have learnt how to say my glass is half-full even when it's broken.  
 I also know how to clone myself.  
 Give, even when there is nothing left.  
 I have my grandparents' leftovers in my habits.

At a literal level, the poem itself celebrates the innocence of childhood in a black family in apartheid South Africa, where even today many of us may be able to recount a “happy childhood”: communal living, sharing and playing with cousins, imagining and inhabiting complex worlds, and “not too poor to afford a *What if?*” It is the sheer audacity and capacity for loving and dreaming in a time of war that is a gift handed down by our foremothers. In celebrating these inherited gifts, Putuma simultaneously examines their shadow side: grandmother’s “machete mouth” that the mirror spits back at you; or the fact that “the first man/ you are taught to revere/ is a white man”; or black queerhood being cloaked by violence and silence, and characterised by hoarding skeletons, duct-taping your screams, holding corpses in your throat, and dying with your hands up and legs open. All the while, for the sake of peace, pain is preferred to a scab of healing because “scabs make people ask questions”.

However, Putuma is not interested in honouring the oath of silence signed with the blood of black womxn. Her poetry exhumes these buried memories,

soothes and embalms them with healing, divines peace over them and lays them to eternal rest, as an act of birthing a new selfhood. The section “Buried Memories” is exacting in addressing the internal workings of unresolved inherited traumas; unlike clothes, they cannot be unadorned, but it is also the determination of the poet not to hand them down any further. The task of this generation, as the poet seems to gesture, is sitting in this generational pain, and remedying it. The identified symptoms of our collective maladies are insomnia, panic attacks, depression, suffocation, self-mutilation, limbo-status, and suicidal thoughts – tantamount to living “inside a mortuary with a welcome mat that says ‘joy’”. Another black lesbian is murdered, you bury yourself with their coffin, “your head [is] hung and sand clenched in your fist/ surrounded by men who do not cry/ and womxn who toss themselves about in the sand/ with no one holding them”. Silence is order at the cemetery.

Putuma’s act of speaking out is thus a disruption to the accepted order. She speaks out at the cemetery of black female bodies to resurrect herself and her kind, because “I grew tired of being the coffin in the room”.

The final act of the triptych, “Postmemory”, is a conscious act of addressing those traumas that lie latent in the personal and national subconscious. It is an act of unlearning; of relearning and remaking a new language that is not implicitly violent to her kind – “*writing* (n): a doctrine used to deliver one from the ills of silencing”. She reimagines this language from the lives and work of cited womxn of colour who have thrown her a “lifeline”. Writing this collection therefore becomes an act of resurrecting self, or moving from silence to expression. It is an act of breathing, for “not everyone can afford to breathe for a living”. This assigns breathing, speaking, and being (also understood as taking space unapologetically), as political acts.

Moving to a place of “postmemory” must necessarily take the effort of the nation, of its men, of cis-gendered folk, of whites, and of blacks in South Africa. For, as she states in “Resurrection”,

The graves are bleeding trauma  
 The memories say, *let me out*  
 The massacres say, *remember me*  
 The graves say, *it still hurts*  
 The skeletons point to where it does.

The personal is political, for Putuma centralises the black female body as a site of national trauma: a grave. Historically, the graves of black people executed

by colonialism and apartheid's brutal forces continue to bleed today; they are not at rest. The massacres bleed throughout history into our today. Their restlessness troubles our collective memories which we seek to lay to rest, as a nation misfortunately invested in the “forgive and forget” creed post-1994. But it still hurts, and the national body is pained, whilst the national psyche is a haunted grave. On a personal level, the graves of black female and queer bodies also bleed trauma. Inhabited by men who do not cry, the nation's infection spills over and exerts its rancid fury on black womxn. We bear the brunt of hundreds of violent years of white supremacy, of colonial capitalism, of hetero-patriarchy, and of Christian fundamentalism. This is why we must speak and take space. This is why Putuma points and speaks to where it hurts. Because our “tongues are burning in our mouths. When we talk about history, we put the fire out”.

### Endnote

- 1 A term that avoids the use of the suffixes “-man” and “-men”, whilst showing inclusivity of cis-gender women (whose assigned sex at birth matches the sex they identify with) and transgender women.