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“I question why I understand what she has said”: Language and decolonial justice in Koleka Putuma’s debut poetry collection *Collective Amnesia*

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# 'I QUESTION WHY I UNDERSTAND WHAT SHE HAS SAID':

## DECOLONIAL JUSTICE IN KOLEKA PUTUMA'S *COLLECTIVE AMNESIA*

**CHELSEA HAITH**

The publication of Koleka Putuma's debut collection *Collective Amnesia* (2017) by uHlanga Press in April 2017 was one of the biggest events in the South African publishing industry in that year and was unmatched in the poetry scene. Poetry collections published in South Africa seldom make two print runs, let alone six. "Tradition teaches us that the mix of experimental poetry collection and small press with a petit budget is not the recipe for a bestseller,"<sup>1</sup> *Brittle Paper's* Ainehi Edoor reminds us. Yet, *Collective Amnesia*, an experimental collection, published by the small uHlanga Press, with a very small budget, climbed to the top of the bestseller lists across South Africa, surpassing both Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and Rupi Kaur's *The Sun and Her Flowers* for a week respectively. Putuma's reputation as a performer, playwright, artist and poet, coupled with uHlanga Press' founder Nick Mulgrew's astute sales strategy<sup>2</sup>, contributed to the success of a collection that resonated with the political and social zeitgeist of disillusionment and frustration in post-transitional South Africa.

This paper functions as part review, part ethnographic account of the collection's publication and the conditions in the society that facilitated its success. I seek to articulate the intervention that *Collective Amnesia* has made into the South African mainstream literary

<sup>1</sup> Ainehi Edoor, "Koleka Putuma Could Change How We Sell African Books" *Brittle Paper*, <https://brittlepaper.com/2017/08/koleka-putuma-change-sell-african-books/>, 8 August 2017.

<sup>2</sup> For those unfamiliar with South African currency, an R100.00 note, which equates to about £5.75, is one of the most common notes used as wages are often paid in this denomination. It is also considered a small enough sum to part with without splitting another note, which makes it a clever price at which to sell the collection because it immediately made the collection more accessible than those ordinarily priced at R140.00.

consciousness, a collection which reflects the complex experience of being in, and of, post-transitional South Africa, and reaches back into the long histories in the country's complicated racial and gender politics. I will explore questions of decolonial justice in relation to *Collective Amnesia*, particularly with regard to South Africa's canon and the collection's position as a cultural text or object in South African popular culture.

In 2017 I worked at uHlanga Press as one of only two employees who produced, publicised, and marketed *Collective Amnesia*. I watched its meteoric rise from a privileged vantage point, and will draw on some of my experiences and observations in my discussion of this collection as a cultural phenomenon. I hope that the duality of my approach, from both cultural and publishing perspectives, speaks to the concerns of the production, study and teaching of "literatures in English" in the post-transitional milieu of South Africa which concerns so many of my colleagues in both industries.

## Restorative Ethic in Decolonial Poetry

Barbara Boswell's article 'Conjuring up her wholeness: Post-transitional black South African women's poetry and its restorative ethic' (December 2016), looks forward and back in its characterisation of black South African women's poetry, coming just five months before the publication of Putuma's *Collective Amnesia*. Boswell argues that black women's poetry in this post-transitional period engages four literary modes to produce a "restorative ethic": "gender justice, embodiment, diaspora, and re-memorying history"<sup>3</sup>. The potential for restoration that Boswell signals is complicated by the uncertainty of the post-transitional discursive space, in which meaning itself is "fluid, incomplete and provisional"<sup>4</sup>, much like

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Boswell, "Conjuring up her wholeness": Post-transitional black South African women's poetry and its restorative ethic.' *Scrutiny* 21.2 (2016), pp. 8-26 (p.9).

<sup>4</sup> Boswell, p.9.

South Africa's social and political transitions. Following the initial Rhodes Must Fall protests in 2015, Achille Mbembe described that transitional moment as a "new cultural temperament", arguing that decolonisation is "in truth a psychic state more than a political project in the strict sense of the term"<sup>5</sup>. While I am sure that many Fallists<sup>6</sup> and political theorists would challenge Mbembe on this point, if we read decolonisation as, perhaps among other things, a psychic state, this new cultural temperament of revising and critiquing history and knowledge systems offers some explication for the restorative ethic of black South African women's poetry.

The protests, which began three years ago in Cape Town, created "a crucial moment in the redefinition of what counts as 'political' in this country"<sup>7</sup>, South Africa. Leon de Kock uses Mbembe's notion of decolonisation as a psychic state in his argument for the valence of stories. He argues that when we hear the emerging narratives by spoken word poets (and he includes Putuma in this category) in what he calls post-post-apartheid, they are the "voices of self, of affirmative self-making in full flow, talking back sharply, and with verve, against earlier histories of denigration and dehumanisation"<sup>8</sup>. This reads as a South African revision of Bill Ashcroft's earlier assertion that "History has effected its regulatory function in all forms of colonial control, and the post-colonial response to history remains

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<sup>5</sup> Achille Mbembe, 'Is Radicalism the same as Nihilism?' *Facebook*, public post 3 September 2015. Reproduced at <http://witspress.bookslive.co.za/blog/2015/09/08/read-achille-mbembes-thoughts-on-decolonisation-is-radicalism-the-same-as-nihilism/> Accessed on 21 October 2017. Web.

<sup>6</sup> The disillusioned post-transitional zeitgeist in South Africa is characterised by intense criticism of Rainbowism and its perceived consequences, which include limited land reform and colonial education systems. The frustration characterising the post-transitional period is exhibited in service delivery protests and the recent radical politicisation of South African university campuses in the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) and Fees Must Fall (FMF) movements from 2015 to the present. Fallism refers to the ideologies of the RMF and FMF protestors, collectively known and self-identifying as Fallists. These ideologies are founded in Fallist interpretations of theories of violence and liberation by Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko and Robert Sobukwe (see Works Cited).

<sup>7</sup> Mbembe, n.pg.

<sup>8</sup> Leon de Kock, "'There is the Black Man's Story and the White Man's Story': Narratives of Self and the Valence of 'Stories' in Postapartheid Culture." *Journal of Literary Studies* 32.3 (2016), pp.36–58 (p. 51).

one of the most complex projects of transformation”<sup>9</sup>. History, memory and transformation are irrevocably intertwined in these various theorists’ conceptions of literatures and cultural moments in post-colonial, post-transitional spaces and places. *Collective Amnesia* is the perfect example of the coming together of these concerns in a text that reflects South Africa’s contemporary moment so articulately.

## Memory

Memory, in *Collective Amnesia*, is subject to revision, and it is important to recognise the ambivalence of whose amnesia, and indeed whose memory, the collection refers to. The titles of each section in the volume are *Inherited Memory*, *Buried Memory*, and *Postmemory*, and these section distinctions stress the disjuncture between different subjective iterations of the past. The collection does so by signalling the unreliability of memory: it manipulates and can be manipulated. Boswell applies Toni Morrison’s notion of re-memorying, as it appears in *Beloved*, to the South African context, arguing that “re-memorying is itself a commentary on the disjunctures between memory and dominant narratives of history”<sup>10</sup>. Putuma explores this notion of re-memorying in order to point up the dominant narratives of the past and to introduce alternative narratives of childhood under apartheid. For example, in “Black Joy”, Putuma ‘re-memories’ her childhood:

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<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Bill Ashcroft, *Post-colonial transformation*. (London, Psychology Press, 2001), (p. 5).

<sup>10</sup> Boswell, p.10; Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Koleka Putuma, *Collective Amnesia*, (Cape Town, uHlanga Press, 2017), p.13.

Here Putuma evokes the cultural production of poverty porn alongside the images of protesting black students that have represented various Fallist movements in the last three years of student protest in South Africa's tertiary education industry.

*Collective Amnesia* melds English, experimental poetic style and Fallist discourses to draw attention to the oppressions that these ideologies, among many other targets of the text, are guilty of perpetuating. Ronit Frenkel and Craig McKenzie suggest that post-transitional discourse rejects notions of unity in nation-building, otherwise known as Rainbowism<sup>12</sup>. In poems such as "1994: A Love Poem", Putuma notes the unconditional and uncritical "love" that white South Africans have for Nelson Mandela, thereby shrewdly rejecting the notion of the nation as a cohesive rainbow, using humour to note the continued lack of economic redistribution and redress in the post-post-apartheid period.

Frenkel and McKenzie argue that post-transitional texts engage in excavation: "History is often interrogated in the literature of the transitional years in the form of buried histories being excavated from a variety of perspectives to add to the growing body of new South African stories"<sup>13</sup>. In her collection, Putuma mines the buried histories in the collective consciousness, though who is included and excluded in the collective to which the title refers, remains, perhaps necessarily, uncertain. This uncertainty demands that the reader consider whose memory is being explored in the collection, and to and for whom the poet is speaking. Each section indicates the myriad ways in which memory is manipulated and manipulates, and Putuma critiques imperialism through religion, patriarchal family structures, violence against women and queer erasure. She also engages with the land question and white fragility in the post-transitional period. For example, in "Mountain", she describes a hike in Namaqualand, during which she 'trespasses' on so-called 'private property':

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<sup>12</sup> Ronit Frenkel and Craig MacKenzie, 'Conceptualizing 'post-transitional' South African literature in English.' *English Studies in Africa* 53.1 (2010), pp.1-10.

<sup>13</sup> Frenkel and MacKenzie, p.1.

When the old white lady in her pyjamas turns my back with her Afrikaans  
 And says, “You are on private property...  
 I question why I understand what she has said  
 And the mountain she calls private.<sup>14</sup>

The language question thus becomes a question of land and ownership. Land is central to the Fallist movements’ demands for justice, drawing as the Fallist discourse does so heavily from Frantz Fanon’s critical race theory. Within the South African academy these demands for land extend, I would suggest, to the knowledge economy. Land, in the current political discourse of South Africa, does not simply represent soil and agriculture, though these are certainly encompassed in the term. Land also represents ownership, representation and the dignity afforded rights-bearing citizens. Fanon argues that the possession of land confers dignity. If we extrapolate land to its more abstract but no less real meaning in the South African imaginary of land as representation and land as economic visibility, then the acquisition of dignity comes to entail representation and inclusion, and this inclusion makes possible the valorisation of one’s humanity. In the above poem, when Putuma is told, in Afrikaans, to leave a private property, she evokes South Africa’s history of land dispossession, the imposition of education in Afrikaans by apartheid governments, and the continued land redistribution debates. By asking “I question why I understand what she has said”, Putuma articulates her experience, and an historic legacy of land dispossession and linguistic imperialism, through a decolonial deconstructionist framework.

In the introduction of their 2017 collection, *Postcolonial Justice*, Anke Bartels Lars Eckstein, Nicole Waller and Dirk Wiemann argue that:

[T]he project of postcolonial justice will have to engage in dialogue on visions of planetary justice from other parts of the globe. As such, it will need not only to take seriously visions of justice beyond Eurocentric confines but will need to investigate critically the material, political, and epistemological mechanisms that have led to their disavowal in the global marketplace of ideas.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Putuma, p.102.

<sup>15</sup> Anke Bartels et al., eds. *Postcolonial Justice*. Boston, Brill, 2017. (pp.xi-xii)

Elleke Boehmer's introduction in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* positions postcolonial literatures in the service of the decolonial project: "As well as a change in power, decolonisation demanded – and still demands – symbolic overhaul, a reshaping of dominant meanings. Postcolonial literature forms part of that overhaul."<sup>16</sup> If postcolonial literature "critically or subversively scrutinizes the colonial relationship"<sup>17</sup> then perhaps post-transitional literature critiques and subverts the narratives of the transition. Post-transitional literature that engages in the South African decolonisation movements of 2015 onwards takes the imperatives of postcolonial literature a step further, pointing out the moments in which, as Ashcroft writes "sovereignty has been transferred but not transformed".<sup>18</sup>

Putuma engages Boswell's literary modes of gender justice, embodiment, diaspora and re-memorying in her poem "On Black Solidarity". In it, she highlights a contemporary example of a situation in which sovereignty remains untransformed, even in a potentially liberatory movement. In the poem she takes her male comrades to task for their patriarchal, misogynist leadership of the Fallist movements, refuting the notion of a unified collective and critiquing a movement of identity politics that subordinates gender to race:

Your solidarity, it seems, is anchored by undermining black womxn's struggles...  
 You want black womxn's bodies on the line.  
 Not the front line.  
 You endorse intersectionality.  
 But not at the expense of your praise and visibility.<sup>19</sup>

Here Putuma highlights the role of privilege in maintaining systems of power, even within protest movements that ostensibly seek to liberate. Such a criticism may well have been met with hostility, but instead the collection has been widely embraced, becoming an object that symbolises a moment in South Africa's post-transitional period.

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<sup>16</sup> Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and postcolonial literature: migrant metaphors*. Oxford, Oxford University Press on Demand, 2005 (p.3).

<sup>17</sup> Boehmer, p.3.

<sup>18</sup> Ashcroft, p.116.

<sup>19</sup> Putuma, p.81.



## Cultural Theory and Book History

Considering the above-mentioned cultural impact, it is worth considering *Collective Amnesia* as both a text and a cultural object. In *Print, Text and Books in South Africa* (2012), Andrew van der Vlies brings the apparently adversarial fields of literary scholarship and book history into conversation with one another, arguing that Derrida's notion that "il n'y a pas dehors texte" hangs on "the understanding that the text always already implies – and requires attention to – its implicatedness in material instantiation"<sup>20</sup>. Van der Vlies argues that:

[W]hile literary criticism has always been concerned with the meanings of texts, book history is concerned with how these meanings are influenced by factors often beyond the control of the authors themselves.<sup>21</sup>

Drawing on van der Vlies's argument, it seems worthwhile and indeed important to examine the processes of production alongside the literary scholarship of the text, keeping in mind Bourdieu's notion of the field of cultural production here when describing the text as a cultural object as well as a collection of poetry.<sup>22</sup>

*Collective Amnesia* situates itself squarely within South Africa's contemporary social, political and intellectual zeitgeist that is at present preoccupied with the intersections of history and memory, and how these inform and complicate one another. More than one reviewer noted that in terms of the content the collection has been a long time coming, and many readers have expressed gratitude for the text, and relief. The collection received glowing reviews in the *Johannesburg Review of Books*, *OkayAfrica*, *Between 10 and 5*, the *Mail & Guardian*, *AfriPOP*, *Johannesburg LIVE* and *HuffingtonPost SA*, features in at least two postgraduate dissertations to date and has received overwhelming acclaim on social media. The collection has also been included in curricula at the University of Cape Town,

<sup>20</sup> Andrew van der Vlies, *Print, text and books in South Africa*, Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2012, (p.13).

<sup>21</sup> Van der Vlies, p.11.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *The field of cultural production: essays on art and literature*, ed. Randal Johnson, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

Stellenbosch University and Rhodes University. *Collective Amnesia* has successfully infiltrated the mainstream from the periphery and in doing so has reframed the dominant narrative of what constitutes the mainstream.

In the review for *Afripop!* Luso Mnthali calls the book a collection of “survival poetry”<sup>23</sup>, while Sabelo Mkhabela for *OkayAfrica* writes: “It’s surreal to hold an anthology of someone who speaks the way I do... The South African publishing industry has its own types of books that it favours, and *Collective Amnesia* just wouldn’t normally make the cut. Which is why Putuma’s book is a special moment”<sup>24</sup>. Given these receptions on widely-read South African media platforms, the popularity of the poems on social media and the collection’s sales figures, *Collective Amnesia* has entered South African popular culture, intervening in the mainstream and bringing concerns of the periphery, those of language, land dispossession and race into the wider literary and political consciousness.

Reading *Collective Amnesia* as a cultural text through Sarah Nuttall’s theory of culture in her 2009 book *Entanglement*, this small collection of poetry becomes more than a literary text: it is an object, subject to cultural production, of South Africa’s post-transitional period. Forms of popular culture are involved in what Sarah Nuttall terms “circulation and transfiguration” and should be interpreted accordingly, rather than as amenable to “methods of reading derived from the tradition of the book, a tradition that stipulates that a cultural text be meaningful”<sup>25</sup>. The ideological hope signalled by the terms ‘decolonise’ and ‘decolonial’ carries with it the concerns captured in the gap Nuttall identifies between “what is” and “what could be”. This is why *Collective Amnesia*, a book-as-object, has become a cultural text as much as it is a collection of poetry.

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<sup>23</sup> Luso Mnthali, ‘Book Review: Collective Amnesia by Koleka Putuma’, *Afripop!* 2017 < <http://afripopmag.com/2017/05/08/book-review-collective-amnesia-by-koleka-putuma/>> 8 August 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Sabelo Mkhabela, ‘Koleka Putuma Is the Groundbreaking New Voice of South African Poetry’, *OkayAfrica*, <http://www.okayafrica.com/koleka-putuma-collective-amnesia/>, 8 August 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement*, Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009, (pp.123-124).

Through the collection, Putuma engages the discourse of decolonisation and what Mbembe calls the “psychic bonds: in particular bonds of pain and suffering” that have become “the privileged mode of identification”<sup>26</sup>. This is a mode of identification that has been central to unifying movements for decolonisation in tertiary institutions. Representing the fluidity and instability of the post-transitional space, Putuma critiques the fissures in the Fallist movements, and uses the discourse of those same movements to create a solidarity that has resulted in the spectacular sale of over three and half thousand copies of her debut collection.

## Entering the Mainstream

Boswell argues that black women’s poetry does the “imaginative work of remembering the injustices of history, while reconfiguring current, gendered nation-building discourses through expanding definitions of what counts as political”<sup>27</sup>, echoing Mbembe’s earlier words almost identically. Boswell seems to suggest therefore that poets like Putuma are doing the work of reconfiguring the nation through their poetry. In *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (2009), Boehmer is concerned with how “‘small’ familial and domestic realities impinge on the large questions of the nation-state”<sup>28</sup> as articulated in postcolonial women’s writing. Putuma engages with the ‘larger’ concerns of the nation, and specifically the South African nation, through language and sarcasm – “Mountain” and “1994: A Love Poem” are examples of these head-on attacks of the post-post-apartheid era, but the political does not end with land, language and Madiba’s love.

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<sup>26</sup> Mbembe, n.pg.

<sup>27</sup> Boswell, p.9.

<sup>28</sup> Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation State*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p.208.

The political becomes a birthday “celebrated/ with a bucket of KFC, a simple cake and Coca-Cola”<sup>29</sup>. The political is an oversized school uniform described as “a savings account in fabric”<sup>30</sup>. Political is: “The gospel / is how whiteness breaks into our homes / and brings us to our knees”<sup>31</sup>. Political is “a pastor’s daughter loving a Muslim woman.”<sup>32</sup> The political complexity of contemporary South African society is evident in the everyday moments Putuma captures. By referring to hand-me-down clothes, the colonial legacy of religion and an inter-racial, inter-religious lesbian relationship, Putuma infuses personal, intimate moments with political intention, producing a reconfiguration of what counts as political in her post-transitional poetry.

Through its inclusion in curricula and therefore in the broader postcolonial mainstream reading lists, Putuma’s re-memorying, reconfiguration and renegotiation of the post-transitional nation state in *Collective Amnesia* engages in the project for decolonial justice. This project is enabled and complicated by English and the politics of production and distribution. Exploring new and revised narratives of post-post-apartheid South Africa, *Collective Amnesia* as a post-transitional text, and here I mean both text as cultural text and text as literary text, has the potential to actuate Boswell’s “restorative ethic”. It can thereby put English to the task of renarrativising the past and present, revitalising an exhausted movement and both relieving and reinvigorating tensions between what is and what could be in South African tertiary education and the South African publishing industry today.

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<sup>29</sup> Putuma, ‘Hand-Me-Downs’, p.14.

<sup>30</sup> Putuma, ‘Hand-Me-Downs’, p.14.

<sup>31</sup> Putuma, ‘Growing up Black & Christian’, p.23.

<sup>32</sup> Putuma, ‘No Easter Sunday for Queers’, p.25.

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