

## HYDROCOLONIAL MEMORY, GENDERED TRAUMA AND QUEER ERASURE IN KOLEKA PUTUMA'S *COLLECTIVE AMNESIA*

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**ABSTRACT.** *Hydrocolonial Memory, Gendered Trauma and Queer Erasure in Koleka Putuma's Collective Amnesia.* This article contributes to the thematic direction of this volume by foregrounding post-liberal critical positions and adopting a methodological framework that can be described as post-semiotic in essence—one that prioritizes affect, materiality, and embodied memory over representational paradigms. Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* explores the complex intersections of memory, identity, and trauma within the socio-political landscape of post-apartheid South Africa. Central to this poetry collection is the motif of water, employed both as a symbol of colonial violence and as a transformative space for reclaiming marginalized identities—particularly those of Black womxn and queer individuals. Through the lenses of hydrocolonialism, ecofeminism, and postmemory, this study examines how Putuma challenges dominant narratives of race, gender, and sexuality, revealing the fluidity of identity and the persistence of historical trauma across generations. Moreover, the collection confronts the systemic erasure of queer identities by disrupting heteronormative and patriarchal frameworks embedded in religious and cultural discourses. By moving beyond traditional semiotic readings and instead emphasizing embodied, affective, and ecological dimensions of trauma and resistance, this analysis engages with critical post-liberal methodologies that remain underexplored in current literary scholarship. By situating *Collective Amnesia* within broader conversations on queer erasure and memory politics, this article not only highlights Putuma's poetic activism as a powerful call for

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visibility, resistance, and healing, but also affirms the necessity of reading contemporary literature through critical frameworks that exceed representational politics. In doing so, it aligns with the volume's concern for rethinking theoretical orthodoxies and making space for neglected critical vocabularies and epistemologies.

**Keywords:** *memory, trauma, queer erasure, hydrocolonialism, post-apartheid South Africa, Koleka Putuma, poetry, identity.*

**REZUMAT. *Memorie hidrocolonială, gendered trauma și queer erasure în Collective Amnesia de Koleka Putuma.*** Lucrarea de față se înscrie în tematica volumului prin aducerea în discuție a unor poziții critice post-liberale adesea ignorate în cadrul studiilor literare actuale și prin utilizarea unei metodologii care poate fi caracterizată drept post-semiotică în esența sa—una care privilegiază afectul, materialitatea și memoria corporală în detrimentul abordărilor centrate strict pe reprezentare. Lucrarea analizează volumul de poezie *Collective Amnesia* al Kolekăi Putuma prin prisma hidrocolonialismului, traumei de gen și a ștergerii identităților queer în contextul de post-apartheid din Africa de Sud. Motivul acvatic este explorat ca simbol dual al violenței coloniale și al unui spațiu fluid și transformator pentru identități marginalizate și periferice, în special pentru femeile de culoare și persoanele queer. Studiul aplică cadre teoretice de hidrocolonialism, ecofeminism și postmemorie pentru a evidenția modul în care Putuma confruntă normele heteronormative și patriarhale, contestând ștergerea identităților queer și oferind o platformă poetică pentru vizibilitate și vindecare. În același timp, analiza propune o lectură dincolo de grilele semiotice convenționale, insistând asupra dimensiunii afective, ecologice și corporale a traumei și rezistenței, în consonanță cu direcții teoretice post-liberale încă insuficient explorate în critica literară contemporană. Articolul evidențiază potențialul radical al operei lirice a Kolekăi Putuma de a rescrie narațiunile dominante privind rasa, genul și sexualitatea în peisajul cultural și politic sud-african contemporan, contribuind deschiderea către epistemologii marginalizate.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *hydrocolonialism, traumă de gen, ștergerea identității queer, Koleka Putuma, Africa de Sud, post-apartheid, poezie, identitate.*

## Introduction

Koleka Putuma is recognized as one of South Africa's most compelling contemporary poets, known for her ability to interweave personal and collective histories within her poetic narratives, creating works that interrogate and challenge heteronormative and colonial conventional notions of identity,

memory, and politics. Her debut poetry collection, *Collective Amnesia* (2017), has received significant acclaim for its bold engagement with themes of race, gender, sexuality, trauma, and the politics of memory—the ways societies choose to remember or forget certain histories, shaping collective identity and power. The collection investigates the silences surrounding Black South African experiences, particularly those of Black womxn and queer individuals, within post-apartheid South Africa. By using poetry as an act of reclamation, Putuma crafts a body of work that resists historical erasure and offers a potent critique of patriarchal power structures. Critical scholarship on Putuma's work has expanded in recent years, including Burger's (2020) discussion of hydrocolonial memory, Sacks's (2024) exploration of digital culture in South-African poetry, and growing attention to South African queer poetics and hydrocolonial studies. These perspectives highlight the intersectional nature of Putuma's poetry, though many analyses have yet to fully integrate the dimensions of queerness and hydrocolonialism within a cohesive theoretical framework.

In this study, the thematic exploration of water in *Collective Amnesia* reveals its centrality and symbolic ramifications. Within the collection, water functions as both a site of trauma and a transformative medium for healing and remembrance. Water, in its varied manifestations—be it oceans, rivers, rain, or baptismal water—serves as an emblem of historical violence, colonial exploitation, and forced amnesia. This forced amnesia is symbolically linked to water through the act of erasure—bodies and histories lost at sea, the washing away of cultural memory, and the use of baptismal water to impose religious and ideological assimilation. Concurrently, it functions as a site of resistance and the formation of identity. This duality is most clearly exemplified in the poem "Water," which directly critiques the colonial histories embedded in water narratives while reclaiming water as a site of Black and queer identities.

This paper will examine how Putuma employs water imagery to explore some of the interconnected themes in *Collective Amnesia*: race, gender and sexuality, (post)memory, and hydrocolonialism. The analysis will demonstrate how Koleka Putuma's work challenges dominant historical narratives and provides an alternative/emergent discourse that foregrounds Black womxnhood and queerness. While Byrne's (2021) influential article provides an important ecofeminist and decolonial reading of water in Putuma's poetry, it primarily centers race and gender, leaving queer and hydrocolonial perspectives underexplored. This study seeks to fill this gap by arguing that water functions not only as a symbol of colonial violence and gendered exploitation but also as a crucial site for queerness, postmemory, and decolonial resistance, thereby expanding and complicating existing readings. Byrne's article offers a significant critical perspective on the role of water in Putuma's collection. The scholar

situates water within a broader tradition of South African womxn's poetry, employing feminist psychoanalysis, feminist new materialism, and decolonial theory to unpack its meaning. The analysis positions water as a deeply racialized and gendered element in Putuma's poetry, aligning with the ecofeminist idea that water and womxn's bodies are both sites of exploitation and resilience. However, it must be noted that Byrne's approach is not without its limitations. While she persuasively contends that the poem "Water" critiques colonialism and white supremacy, her reading does not engage with the poem's queer dimensions or consider water's capacity to disrupt heteronormative structures and discourses.

This study aims to build upon Byrne's insights by addressing these gaps, arguing that Putuma reclaims water as a space for collective resistance and self-definition by incorporating a hydrocolonial perspective alongside ecofeminist, queer, and postmemory frameworks.

### Theoretical Framework

To explore the role of water in *Collective Amnesia*, this paper employs three central and intersecting theoretical perspectives: hydrocolonialism, ecofeminism, and postmemory theory. These frameworks are used in conjunction to illuminate how water operates as a medium through which colonial histories, gendered trauma, and intergenerational memory coalesce in the text.

The concept of hydrocolonialism, developed within postcolonial studies, explores how bodies of water have historically facilitated colonial expansion, exploitation, and racial violence. Drawing on Astrida Neimanis's (2017) posthuman feminist engagement with water—particularly her framing of "bodies of water"—this perspective connects the materiality of water to the histories and legacies of empire. The history of South Africa is linked with maritime colonialism, where oceans and rivers functioned as conduits for the transatlantic slave trade and sites of forced displacement. Putuma's "Water" offers a critical perspective on this legacy, exploring how water becomes a site of contestation where the echoes of colonial histories persist. The poem highlights how Black (queer) bodies have been both submerged and erased in historical narratives, and demands a reckoning with the ways in which water has been weaponized against marginalized communities.

Ecofeminism also informs this analysis, as it highlights the intersections between environmental degradation and gender-based oppression in *Collective Amnesia*. According to feminist scholars, there is a long-standing argument that womxn's bodies are symbolically linked to nature, often in ways that reinforce

patriarchal control (Merchant 1980; Plumwood 1993). Byrne's analysis of "Water" engages with ecofeminist ideas, particularly in how womxn's labour – such as fetching water, cooking, and cleaning – renders them more vulnerable to the impacts of environmental degradation. Ecofeminism also allows for a reading of "Water" as a site of opposition. In her collection, Putuma subverts conventional associations of water with purity and domesticity, instead using it to expose the racial and gendered violence embedded in historical and religious narratives—for example, linking the ocean's saltiness to the tears of enslaved South Africans and portraying baptism as an act intertwined with histories of invasion and oppression.

Marianne Hirsch's concepts of postmemory (2012) and intergenerational trauma offer a third lens for understanding Putuma's engagement with history and memory. Postmemory is defined as the process through which trauma is transmitted across generations, influencing the identities of those who have not directly experienced the trauma itself, but who continue to bear its emotional and psychological weight. Putuma's work aligns most closely with affiliative postmemory, as she connects her own and her community's experiences to the broader, inherited memory of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid, forging solidarity through shared remembrance rather than strictly familial transmission. In *Collective Amnesia*, water functions as a medium through which ancestral pain is both inherited and contested. The ocean, in particular, becomes a metaphor for the suppressed histories of the African diaspora and the erasure of Black narratives in mainstream historical accounts. Using the medium of poetry, Putuma offers a counterpoint to this erasure, employing water as a conduit for memory and storytelling, as in the line: "The sea is a graveyard too" (Putuma 2017, 40).

The use of these theoretical perspectives will provide a nuanced reading of *Collective Amnesia*, expanding beyond Byrne's racial analysis to consider the poem's queer and gendered dimensions, particularly in its thematic and affective engagement with sexuality, intimacy, and resistance. In doing so, it will demonstrate how Putuma reclaims water not only as a site of historical violence but also as a space for resistance, healing, and identity formation, envisioning queer and decolonial futures that challenge inherited narratives of erasure and oppression.

### **Literature Review: Critical Perspectives on Water in South African Womxn's Poetry**

When writing about how South African womxn poets respond to water as both a symbol and a reality, Deirdre Cassandra Byrne systematically explores the (hydro)connections between femininity, environmental degradation, and

colonial history within the Anthropocene. Her article, “Water in the Anthropocene: Perspectives on Poetry by South African Women,” published in 2021 in *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, focuses on the poetry of Allison Claire Hoskins, Toni Stuart, Koleka Putuma, Wilma Stockenström, and Gabeba Baderoon. Byrne employs three distinct theoretical frameworks: feminist psychoanalysis, feminist new materialism—an approach that emphasizes the agency of matter and the entanglement of bodies, environments, and power—and decolonial theory. It must be added here that, in addition to Byrne’s analysis, other scholars such as Bibi Burger (2020) and Uhuru Phalafala (2017) have explored Putuma’s work within the broader context of South African queer poetics, emphasizing themes of resistance, identity, and the negotiation of postcolonial histories.

Byrne’s study highlights how Allison Claire Hoskins and Toni Stuart use audio-visual poetry to represent water as a transformative force, capable of bringing about change and retribution—in Byrne’s terms, a symbolic and restorative reckoning with historical and environmental injustice. It also examines Koleka Putuma’s poem *Water*, which critiques the colonial exploitation of water and, through Byrne’s ecofeminist lens, calls for its restoration as a site of memory, identity, and interconnectedness between human and ecological well-being for Black people. Wilma Stockenström’s *The Wisdom of Water* utilizes traditional elements to portray water as a vital force personally attached to womxn and the natural world. Lastly, the article notes that Gabeba Baderoon uniquely addresses the impact of climate change, using her poetry to highlight the environmental degradation caused by human activity. Through these diverse perspectives, Byrne’s research demonstrates how the poets collectively depict water as a potent symbol of connection and transformation.

This critical part of the paper focuses on the ecofeminist approach in Byrne’s reading of Koleka Putuma’s poem *Water*, representing a “skillful and multimodal delinking from Eurocentric thinking about Black people’s relationship to the natural world” (Byrne 2021: 3). Building on Byrne’s framework, my reading further explores how this delinking incorporates queer spatialities and the concept of hydrocolonialism to reveal water as a site of both embodied trauma and transformative resistance. Byrne establishes her ecofeminist methodology from the outset, explaining that the provision of water for drinking, cooking, and cleaning is a fundamental aspect of household and family socio-economic security. This responsibility is predominantly borne by womxn across cultures, reflecting the social duties and clichés that designate reproductive labour as “women’s work” (Byrne 2021, 1).

Placing the reader in the geological temporal context often termed the “Anthropocene,”<sup>2</sup> Byrne draws on Donna Haraway’s more situated and multispecies critique—sometimes framed as the “Chthulucene”—to highlight how the impacts of climate change are unevenly distributed between men and womxn. Womxn bear a disproportionate responsibility for ensuring food and water security, making them more vulnerable to the adverse effects of environmental damage. Byrne argues that this could be a key reason why some South African womxn poets—whose gender is associated with water in myth, symbolism, and popular media—engage with the theme of water in their work (Byrne 2021, 1). Applying a hydrocolonial lens to Byrne’s article, one can observe that the author essentially describes female bodies in a way that resonates with Astrida Neimanis’s concept of “bodies of water” (Neimanis 2017), which emphasizes bodies as actively engaged in the hydrological cycle—an interpretation that, while not explicitly cited by Byrne, helps deepen the understanding of her argument:

*Women’s bodies are strongly associated with blood (via menstruation); milk (signaling their capacity for motherhood); and tears (physiological signs of emotion). Their psyches are perceived as mutable because they are supposedly more susceptible to emotion than men. Women tend to be perceived as physiologically and psychologically fluid and watery. Poetic representations attest to this association. (Byrne 2021, 2)*

Byrne critically engages with this essentialist linkage, highlighting how such associations simultaneously reinforce gendered stereotypes while also offering poetic potential to challenge and reconfigure the meanings attached to women’s embodied fluidity.

Koleka Putuma’s poetry makes no exception. Her debut collection *Collective Amnesia* evokes water in ways that foreground painful historical experiences within South African culture. Byrne highlights the importance of race and gender roles in Putuma’s collection, even suggesting that Bibi Burger’s interpretation, which emphasizes formal poetic techniques and aesthetic qualities, lacks adequate focus on the racial aspects central to Putuma’s work. Through close reading, Byrne identifies that Putuma’s poem “Water” evokes a strong dialectical antagonism: the lyrical voice adopts an “us” versus “you” approach, creating a forceful critique of heteronormative and patriarchal white male deities.

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<sup>2</sup> According to Donna Haraway, the Anthropocene represents the realization that human actions have caused climate change and environmental degradation. The National Geographic Society calls it “an unofficial unit of geologic time, used to describe the most recent period in Earth’s history when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet’s climate and ecosystems”.

Byrne's interpretations of specific metaphors are presented with interpretive certainty, though alternative readings remain plausible. For example, in the lines from Putuma's poem: "May that be the conversation at the / table / And we can all thereafter wash this / bitter meal with amnesia," Byrne argues that the image of "the table" evokes the Last Supper, a pivotal event in Christian tradition, while the "bitter meal" alludes to a historical episode in South Africa when Black people were compelled to serve food to white people. The term "amnesia," therefore, evokes the erasure of colonial histories—a phenomenon that resonates with the title of the collection.

The author's interpretation of Putuma's poem is clearly informed by a racial perspective, particularly emphasizing her status as a "wake artist".<sup>3</sup> However, the interpretation is arguably one-sided, as it overlooks aspects of queerness—which would foreground non-normative sexualities and embodied resistances—and the application of a hydrocolonial critique, which would emphasize the entanglement of water, colonial violence, and Black bodies in Putuma's work. Byrne's understanding of water in Putuma's poem seems limited to its role in expressing suppressed histories and memories, with insufficient attention to its potential for critiquing gender roles. Nonetheless, the article remains a valuable contribution to the field, elucidating the lyrical power of contemporary South African poets. While Byrne does not explicitly invoke postmemory theory, I draw on this framework to further emphasize the transgenerational trauma present in the work. The article also successfully explores water's potential as a unifying force between these two concepts.

## Water as a Symbol of Colonial Violence

*Collective Amnesia* challenges historical amnesia and provides a poetic reimagination of water as both a site of trauma and a source of empowerment for marginalized identities—through narrative reclamation and collective memory that affirm identity and resistance. As Shun Man Emily Chow-Quesada writes in her article, approximately three decades have elapsed since the termination of apartheid in South Africa; yet the nation continues to grapple with the lingering shadows of its history. Despite concerted efforts to establish a "rainbow nation," underlying tensions persist, particularly regarding the silencing of the voices of Black womxn (Chow-Quesada 2024, 211). Putuma's

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<sup>3</sup> In the context of Christina Sharpe's conceptualisation of "wake work" (2016), Putuma's practice can be understood as a form of artistic and intellectual intervention, aimed at challenging and disrupting oppressive, colonial, and patriarchal epistemologies.



*Collective Amnesia* is deeply autobiographical, as she manages to “amplify marginalised voices and interrogate the roles of trauma and memory in literary activism” (Chow-Quesada 2024, 211).

Putuma attracted global attention with her poem “Water,” which she performed at TEDxStellenbosch in 2015. According to Sacks, the white audience reacted with disapproval, and the venue decided not to publish her performance. In response, Putuma released her own recording, which attracted further significant attention (Sacks 2024, 155). The poem’s impact can be attributed to its ability to address unresolved racial tensions in South Africa, particularly by drawing upon memory to challenge the official narrative of the post-apartheid “new” South Africa.<sup>4</sup>

Water is employed in the poem as a medium of reflection with regard to colonial violence; here, “collective amnesia” illustrates what Leela Gandhi calls “postcolonial amnesia” (Gandhi 1998, 4). While both terms refer to the societal forgetting of historical traumas, “collective amnesia” emphasizes shared memory loss within a specific community, whereas “postcolonial amnesia” situates this forgetting within the broader context of colonial legacies and their ongoing effects. This phenomenon may be interpreted as indicative of an impulse towards historical self-invention, or alternatively, a necessity to initiate a new beginning and thereby obliterate distressing memories of subjugation. Annel Pieterse’s assertion that Putuma uses her work to resist “coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge, and coloniality of being—in a process of unlearning” (Pieterse 2018, 35) is therefore vindicated: “You cannot wade in the ocean and not be in conversation with the enslaved bodies that came before you” (Putuma 2017, 17).

By invoking the ocean—a symbol of both colonial violence (the transatlantic slave trade) and cultural identity – Putuma challenges the reader to confront erased histories and engage in a process of unlearning, demonstrating how her poetry disrupts dominant narratives and insists on reclaiming knowledge through remembrance and resistance.

In such a context, it is clear that trauma and memory are inseparable. Returning to Marianne Hirsch’s framework, the conceptualization of postmemory provides a relevant framework for understanding Putuma’s engagement with both trauma and memory. Hirsch defines postmemory as: “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before, to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (Hirsch 2012, 5).

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<sup>4</sup> For Putuma’s firsthand account of the censorship surrounding her 2015 TEDxStellenbosch performance of “Water,” see her open letter to the event organizers, where she describes the removal of her poem as “an act of diminishing my time, craft and intellect” and critiques the decision as complicity in the racial privilege of the predominantly white Stellenbosch community. (Putuma, 2015)

This may be indeed relevant to Putuma's work, as her poetry does not only recall trauma but actively interrogates and reclaims it, transforming memory into both a site of pain and a source of empowerment (Chow-Quesada 2024, 212). In *Collective Amnesia*, Putuma engages with "inherited trauma" – particularly the violence of colonialism, apartheid, and gendered oppression – illustrating how memory is not static but rather a dynamic and contested space.

Putuma suggests that Black womxn's trauma remains unresolved, lingering both in the ocean and within postmemory. Much like Hirsch's postmemory, Putuma's work shows how trauma persists across generations, shaping identities and consciousness. Putuma reframes memory as a tool for agency, challenging historical (queer) erasure and reclaiming narrative control. The following section will discuss this matter in more detail.

### **Water and Queer Erasure**

The notion of queer erasure refers to the systemic silencing or omission of LGBTQ+ identities and experiences, often in social, political, and cultural narratives. Sarah Ahmed explains that social norms produce 'compulsory heterosexuality,' rendering queer identities invisible within dominant cultural frameworks: "Compulsory heterosexuality functions as a script that directs bodies into specific alignments, making some desires, relationships, and futures appear natural while rendering others unintelligible or impossible" (Ahmed 2004, 145). Within the context of South African literature, this erasure is particularly unsettling, as the country's political history of apartheid and subsequent post-apartheid national dominant discourse has frequently marginalized sexual minorities. Water, as a symbol, has the potential to resist such erasure, acting as a fluid and transformative force that challenges heteronormative structures. By examining how water is used in the poetry of South African poets and exploring the critical perspectives surrounding queer erasure, this section will discuss how collective amnesia is challenged in the representation of LGBTQ+ identities.

Although there have been significant legislative victories for LGBTQ+ rights, including the inclusion of sexual orientation in the *Constitution*, members of the LGBTQ+ community in South Africa continue to be marginalized in public spaces. Within the cultural sphere, notably in the domains of poetry and art, the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals are frequently overlooked or erased, leading to a form of collective amnesia. "Wake artists" and writers such as Putuma, Lebo Mashile and Mark Gevisser actively challenge the heteronormative assumptions embedded in the South African socio-political background by remembering and representing LGBTQ+ identities.

While the aforementioned article by Byrne provides critical insights into the intersectionality of race, gender, and post-colonial legacies in South African poetry, its focus on issues of race and class means that it risks excluding or simplifying the complex nature of identity, including queerness, which is clearly interconnected with the political and social concerns it addresses. The erasure of queerness in critical readings is not an isolated issue but is indicative of the broader neglect of LGBTQ+ narratives within post-apartheid South African culture. Byrne acknowledges the “gendered” nature of power dynamics and the “gendered implications [of water] for human socio-economic existence and for symbolic communication” (Byrne 1) but often fails to fully engage with the ways in which queer identities are specifically shaped by both historical and contemporary societal forces. For instance, an engagement with queer identities might explore how water in Putuma’s poem symbolizes not only racial and gendered trauma but also the fluidity and resilience of non-normative sexualities, highlighting their resistance to colonial and heteronormative erasure. Consequently, the reading falls short in fully grasping the radical potential of poets like Putuma, whose works directly engage with the fluidity of sexuality and gender.

In “Water” Putuma critiques the heteronormative and patriarchal interpretations of religious texts, highlighting the erasure of queer identities within these dominant narratives: “For all we know the disciples could have been queer, the holy trinity some weird, twisted love triangle. And the Holy Ghost transgender.” Moreover, the visual imagery used for the act of submerging or drowning in water can be interpreted as a metaphor for the process of silencing queerness, as individuals grapple with navigating their sexual identities in a world that stigmatises them. Water functions here as an agent of visibility, serving to both obscure and reveal—echoing Sara Ahmed’s concept of “unintelligibility,” where marginalized identities are simultaneously rendered visible yet misunderstood or erased within dominant frameworks. By employing this watery imagery, Putuma gives voice to the unseen, offering a platform for the expression of those whose narratives have historically been obscured. This act of bringing forward the often unseen stories and experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals is fundamental in challenging the erasure of queerness from the South African literary canon, which, like every canon, has been dominated by narratives that focus on race, colonialism, apartheid, and national identity, often centering male and heterosexual perspectives.

It is important to acknowledge at this point that the writers above mentioned, Lebo Mashile and Mark Gevisser, have also incorporated elements of fluidity and transformation in their works. Even though Mashile rarely employs queerness explicitly in her poetry, the fluidity of gender and sexuality, as well as the strength of Black womxn, are recurrent themes in her experiences of being a womxn of colour in the post-apartheid society: “I see the wisdom of

eternities / In ample thighs / Belying their presence as adornments / To the temples of my sisters” (Mashile 2006, 22). Gevisser’s background is entirely different, as he identifies as a white gay male. He also engages with the historical erasure of queerness in his work, particularly in his book *Lost and Found in Johannesburg* (2006), where he reflects on the personal and political implications of living as a queer individual in post-apartheid South Africa: “In a society where sexual orientation has so often been silenced, it is important to speak of it, not just for ourselves, but for the generations to come, so that they might live without fear” (Gevisser 2009: 141). This call to speak openly about sexual orientation resonates with the concept of postmemory and literary activism, as it seeks to break cycles of silence and fear by transmitting affirming narratives to future generations, thus fostering healing and social transformation.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Koleka Putuma’s *Collective Amnesia* stands as a powerful collection that explores memory, identity, and resistance, with water functioning as a central motif that binds together intersecting experiences of race, gender, sexuality, and trauma. By using water as both a symbol of colonial violence and a space for reclamation, Putuma’s poetry navigates the histories of South Africa, shedding light on the marginalized experiences of Black South African womxn and queer individuals. Through her lyrical engagement with water, Putuma interrogates the erasure of these identities, providing a platform for the silenced voices of the past and present. This analysis of *Water* demonstrated how feminist new materialism, postmemory theory, and hydrocolonial critique intersect to reveal the poem’s layered engagement with water as a site of trauma, resistance, and identity formation. Together, these perspectives illuminate how Putuma’s work challenges colonial and patriarchal narratives while foregrounding the embodied experiences of Black queer subjects.

Hydrocolonialism highlights the ways in which water, as a site of colonial violence, also functions as a medium for contesting the historical and cultural forces that have long shaped the lives of Black and queer communities—an interplay that is not only thematic but also embodied in Putuma’s lyrical form and poetic strategies. The colonial legacy of exploitation is inextricably tied to water, which has historically been used as a means of erasure and oppression. Yet, in Putuma’s work, water also emerges as a vehicle for memory and identity formation. This duality of water—both as a symbol of trauma and a source of healing—reveals the fluidity and complexity of identities in post-apartheid South Africa.

Putuma's use of water imagery challenges dominant gender and sexual norms, specifically critiquing the heteronormative structures that continue to marginalise queer identities. As seen in *Water*, Putuma exposes the ways in which queer people, particularly queer womxn, are erased within both historical and religious narratives. The poem's subversion of religious symbols and the play on fluidity in water imagery serve as a stark critique of societal norms that seek to suppress queer identities. By invoking water as both a life-sustaining force and a site of oppression, the poet opens up a space for the visibility of queer experiences, offering a counter-narrative to the erasure of queerness within both mainstream and literary discourses.

In contrast to Deirdre Cassandra Byrne's analysis, which largely focuses on race and gender, this study broadens the lens through which Putuma's work is understood by including a more robust exploration of queerness. While Byrne's feminist and ecofeminist frameworks provide valuable insights into the ways in which water symbolizes both exploitation and resistance, her reading overlooks the specific ways in which water challenges heteronormative and patriarchal structures. The lack of queer engagement in Byrne's analysis misses the opportunity to fully grasp the radical potential of Putuma's work in disrupting normative gender and sexual identities, which is a key aspect of the poem *Water*. A queer reading would highlight how the poem resists fixed identity categories and subverts spiritual binaries, revealing alternative modes of embodiment and belonging that challenge dominant colonial and heteronormative frameworks.

Ultimately, *Collective Amnesia* serves as a reclamation of space and narrative for those whose histories have been obscured by colonial, gendered, and heteronormative forces. Through her vivid and evocative use of water, Putuma offers an important poetic piece on memory, survival, and the ongoing fight against erasure. Her work not only calls attention to the historical traumas of Black South Africans but also challenges the present-day invisibility of queer identities within both cultural and political spheres, including state policies and media representation. By reading *Water* through the lens of hydrocolonialism, ecofeminism, and queer theory, it becomes evident that Putuma's poetry is not only a critique of South Africa's post-apartheid landscape but also a call for visibility and recognition of marginalized identities, offering a space for healing and remembrance.

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