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ARTICLE

Knowledge and Unlearning in the Poetry of Koleka Putuma and Sindiswa Busuku-Mathese

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Abstract

This paper provides a reading, through a decolonial lens, of the debut work of two recently published South African poets, Sindiswa Busuku-Mathese and Koleka Putuma. In the work of both poets, the reader encounters contemporary South African black womxn subjects, constructed in the matrix of global coloniality. The works articulate issues of identity and belonging, with which many young South Africans are undoubtedly grappling. Both poets identify, interrogate, and resist what might be termed the realms of coloniality—namely coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge, and coloniality of being—in a process of "unlearning". A close reading of the themes and aesthetics of these two poets suggests that the site of enunciation for the speaking subjects that emerge is located at the fault lines between two or more very divergent knowledge frameworks.

Keywords: Sindiswa Busuku-Mathese; Koleka Putuma; *Loud and Yellow Laughter*; *Collective Amnesia*; South African poetry; decolonial aesthetics; experimental poetic form

Arguably, Koleka Putuma and Sindiswa Busuku-Mathese are two of the most important young voices in South Africa at the moment: Busuku-Mathese was awarded the 2018 Ingrid Jonker Prize for her debut poetry collection *Loud and Yellow Laughter* (2016), and Putuma was included in the 2018 Forbes Africa Under 30 list. Putuma's debut poetry collection, *Collective Amnesia* (2017), is a best-seller.

In their work, both poets explore the paradox of "belonging" and "knowing", as well as the process of "unlearning" in contemporary South Africa. In a 2018 interview with Lynne Rippenaar-Moses, Busuku-Mathese describes her work as an exploration of what it means "to be young and struggling with the liminal space between two parents who

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represent radically different worlds" (Rippenaar-Moses 2018). Similarly, Putuma's work often situates the subject in a position between two radically different worlds, such as in her poem "No Easter Sunday for Queers" (2017, 25–33), which tracks the differences in the speaker's experiences as a queer womxn in the spaces of the "Northern Suburb" and the "Southern Suburb" respectively. While both works thus offer examples of a struggle for identity and experiences of alienation, they also present alternatives to traditional ways of belonging in a country as diverse as South Africa.

In this article, I argue that the debut works of both Busuku-Mathese and Putuma lend themselves to a decolonial analysis, as they illustrate the ways in which young black South African womxn subjects, constructed in the matrix of global coloniality, confront the coloniality of power, the coloniality of knowledge, and the coloniality of being as they experience these dominations at work in their lives and histories. I then explore the ways in which these works might be considered examples of an emergent South African decolonial aesthetics.

According to Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007, 242), the term "coloniality" denotes the long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, "but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations." The matrix of global coloniality is constituted by a set of three interrelating dominations, namely coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge, and coloniality of being. As defined by Walter Mignolo (2011), coloniality of power "worked as an epistemic mechanism that classified people around the world by color and territories, and managed (and still manages) the distribution of labor and the organization of society." Coloniality of knowledge denotes the ways in which Eurocentric knowledge systems are privileged over other knowledge systems. Coloniality of being refers to "imperial enforcement and management of subjectivity" (Mignolo 2011). Reflecting on the work of Rodolfo Kusch and the concept of "immigrant consciousness", Mignolo notes that this concept is an expression and experience of the "*awareness of coloniality of being*, of being out of place in the set of regulations (e.g., cosmology) of 'modernity'" (Mignolo 2011, original emphasis).

Explicit interrogations of the coloniality of power can be found in Putuma's work, in which the speaking subject repeatedly confronts the colonial legacies of apartheid. Putuma also consciously employs formal devices that speak to her experience of the coloniality of knowledge. As an outspoken queer activist, her poetry deals directly with the coloniality of being, with a specific focus on the entanglements between Christianity and African patriarchy.

While Busuku-Mathese's *Loud and Yellow Laughter* is not as explicitly constructed as an interrogation into the coloniality of power, the collection's focus on an interracial, alternative family structure in post-apartheid South Africa nonetheless raises implicit issues around labour and the distribution of power as legacies of apartheid policies, and thus reveals the workings of the coloniality of power. I would argue, however, that her

work interrogates the specific ways in which a coloniality of being operates or functions in a South African context. Busuku-Mathese notes that her intention in the collection was to "present an alternative to the traditional [family structures] and a view of a different form of parenting ... [that] affirms that normal is not always traditional", and she hopes that the collection "contributes to conversations about our different forms of South Africanness" (Rippenaar-Moses 2018).

Both Busuku-Mathese and Putuma thus focus our attention on social relations, and ask us to reimagine these social relations outside the domination of Western imperialism. This practice might be understood as a process of "delinking", which is described by Mignolo as follows: if coloniality is a process of "inventing identifications", then "for identification to be decolonial it needs to be articulated as 'des-identification' and 're-identification,' which means it is a process of delinking" (in Gaztambide-Fernández 2014, 198).

Mignolo goes on to dismiss the notion of "representation", which presupposes a world "out there" that someone is representing, as a basic assumption of Western mainstream epistemology. Mignolo argues that there is not a world that is represented, "but a world that is constantly invented in the enunciation." This enunciation is not enacted to "represent" the world, but to "confront or support previous existing enunciations" (in Gaztambide-Fernández 2014, 198). To think decolonially thus means to start from "enunciation" and not from "representation".

To my mind, Putuma's trope of "unlearning" can be understood as an exercise in "starting from enunciation", while Busuku-Mathese's interrogation of personal history and memory destabilises the concept of representation and can also be read as a play of enunciations. For these reasons, the works can be considered examples of an emergent South African decolonial aesthetics.

The production process for both collections is a further indicator of the decolonial aesthetics of these two works, since both were published by independent presses: Busuku-Mathese's *Loud and Yellow Laughter* was published by Botsotso in 2016, and uHlanga published Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* in 2017. These presses actively invite submissions that are "new [and] experimental" (uHlanga, n.d.) and work that "has integrity and worth as an expression of individual experience and of our society" (Botsotso, n.d.). The presses can thus be seen as engaging in a process of "delinking" by creating sites of cultural production and dissemination for new knowledge and alternative forms that might not be accommodated by the mainstream presses.

The experimental nature of Busuku-Mathese's and Putuma's work underscores their conscious departure from, and challenge to, conventional poetic forms. Busuku-Mathese's *Loud and Yellow Laughter* is presented as a dramatic script, with scene divisions and a list of major and minor characters. This choice evokes the conventions of a drama, driven by action, and the reader is invited to approach the text in a linear

fashion, reading from Scene I to Scene IV. The narrative that unfolds, however, is not quite linear, with sudden shifts in place and time, and between characters and perspectives.

The narrative tracks a daughter's experience of her adoptive father's prolonged illness and death, and her process of reconstructing his life—and necessarily her own and her mother's—in the wake of his death, as she sorts through the things he left behind. The father is an Englishman, originally from Yorkshire, who settles in Durban and makes a living as a used car salesman. When the mother, a woman from Mt. Fletcher in the Eastern Cape, starts working as his domestic helper, they become friends. He adopts her daughter, and they enter into a platonic co-parenting relationship. The work juxtaposes reconstructions of the father's childhood in England, his time as an enlisted soldier in Germany during World War II, as well as his later life in Durban, with reconstructions of the mother's marriage to and divorce from "the gambler", whom she left while pregnant with "the girl child". Interspersed with these reconstructions are recollections by the girl child of her childhood living with her adoptive father, and seeing her mother intermittently. Through these juxtapositions, which invite a meditation on losses, blanks, and lapses, the reader gains a sense of the girl child as emerging subject, caught between two very divergent experiential frameworks.

Busuku-Mathese weaves archival material such as photographs, lists, and letters into and between her poems, thus reframing these documents and images in a poetic idiom. In this way, the work is palimpsestic: the text is layered, read from different perspectives, and marked by erasure. The reader is often required to make connections and, literally, to fill in blanks: in some instances blank blocks instead of an image appear where a text caption describes a photograph, and information on documents is redacted or left blank. This device destabilises the relationship between the author and the text.

By putting the reader in a position where she becomes a producer of meaning, the work troubles the notion of representation and resists authorial sovereignty. Although the work is presented as a deeply personal auto/biographical excavation of family history and trauma, the work's experimental form resists the unifying tendencies of the confessional "I". Instead, multiple, fragmented subjectivities and histories emerge, intersect, and disappear, as the reader follows and participates in constructing the unfolding action of this intercontinental, intergenerational, interracial family drama.

The cover blurb of Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* states that in her poems, Putuma "explodes the idea of authority in various spaces to ask what has been learnt and what must be unlearnt." Her work is thus actively framed as an engagement with multiple forms of knowledge and power. Furthermore, the poems are prefaced by her acknowledgements, which read like a praise poem to "the womxn whose genius has influenced the way I look at and talk about the world" (2017, s.p.), thus signalling a womxn-centred knowledge frame. By invoking the form of the praise poem, Putuma occupies the position of the praise poet or *imbongi*, whose historical role, according to

Russell Kaschula (2012, 43), has been to act as mediator, critic, and educator. Putuma's use of form is experimental and diverse, shifting seamlessly between praise poetry, sermons, conversations, lists, and footnotes, among others.

Although the lyrical "I" is very pronounced in Putuma's collection, this "I", like the subject in Busuku-Mathese's work, registers the fault lines and tensions of a subject caught between conflicting experiential and epistemological frameworks. The most pronounced of these is the conflict, traced out in the aforementioned "No Easter Sunday for Queers", between the subject's Christian, father-centred childhood home (the father is a preacher) in the "Northern Suburb" and the queer, womxn-centred world that the subject encounters as she explores her emergent sexuality in the "Southern Suburb".

As the title suggests, Putuma is preoccupied with questions of history and memory. Although the contents of the collection are organised quite conventionally in three consecutive sections labelled "1. Inherited Memory", "2. Buried Memory", and "3. Post-Memory", the process of "unlearning" is formally registered in the structure and layout of individual poems. For example, in the first section, "Inherited Memory", the first poem in the collection, "Storytelling" (2017, 11), consists of a title, "Storytelling", left-aligned at the top of an otherwise blank page, with a superscript "1". This indicates a footnote that reads: "How my people remember. How my people archive. How we inherit the world."

Putuma thus leads with a poem that complements the form of the preceding acknowledgements, and cements her approach to knowledge firmly within the oral tradition. Through the use of the possessive and collective pronouns "my" and "we", the speaker aligns herself with, and claims ownership of, the ways in which the people she claims as "hers" experience and know the world. The invocation of the footnote is a decolonial play, which signals the dominance of an academic (Western, print) form that relegates "her people's" form of knowledge production and her own voice to the margins—or in this case, the footnotes—of history. Through this print performance, Putuma consciously articulates the experience of the coloniality of knowledge (the relegation of certain forms of knowledge to "footnotes") and the coloniality of being (how people "inherit the world" differently).

One of the key preoccupations in both collections is language, reflecting the fact that language, at least since the arrival of the early Dutch colonisers, has long been a site of contestation and control in South Africa. Maldonado-Torres, citing Mignolo, points out that coloniality of being is closely linked to the lived experience of colonisation and its impact on language: knowledge and wisdom "cannot be detached from language; languages are not just 'cultural' phenomena in which people find their 'identity'; they are also the location where knowledge is inscribed" (2007, 242). In both collections, we find poems that speak to the disjuncture experienced by a subject who is alienated from her mother tongue.

Busuku-Mathese's poem "A Fragment from Mother" (2016, 38) is addressed to "The Girl Child (b. 1990)". The title first speaks to the incompleteness of the personal archive that the speaker is constructing in the aftermath of the death of her adoptive father and, second, it signals the relative absence of her mother from this archive. The third implication of the title is that the girl child experiences her mother in fragments.

This prose poem is enclosed in brackets and the first line reads: "[**...I GAVE YOU TO HIM** because he could give you all the things I couldn't." The opening phrase, which is emphasised by the use of a bold, all caps font and its repetition at the end of the poem, might initially invoke patriarchal customs whereby daughters are gifted to men or traded in other ways. However, this resonance is complicated by the subsequent explication of the mother's paradoxical position: she must give up her child in order to give her child all the things that she cannot give her.

Among these things is an appreciation of jazz music, history, "[h]ow to eat gracefully with a knife and fork". However, for the mother, the primary benefit was that the adoptive father could teach the girl child to speak English: "Not my kind of English, his English. I knew that if you had that kind of clean, clear English, you would do better than me. Good English opens doors. People take you seriously when you speak, the way you speak, they listen to you, to the clarity of your English, they are impressed by it and they pay attention to it." Here, the speaking subject, the mother, articulates the ways in which unequal power dynamics are mapped in language: "Good English" opens doors and commands respect.

The child, who has no agency in this transaction, gains knowledge of and mastery over the English language and its attendant cultural capital, but suffers a loss of connection to her mother, her mother's culture, and her mother tongue. By the time we come back to the phrase "I gave you to him" at the end of the poem, a complex and fraught encounter between the mother's culture and the adoptive father's culture has been staged and inscribed on the object of the exchange, the girl child—who is of course not an object, but a subject struggling to emerge from this encounter.

Similarly, the speaking subject in Putuma's poem "Local" (2017, 107) articulates a sense of alienation and ontological conflict:

> My mother tongue
> sits in my throat like an allergy
>
> It feels like I will die if I speak it
> It feels like I will die if I don't
>
> I am carrying
> An overnight bag
> A bag of tricks

A survival toolkit
A suitcase of DOs and DON'Ts

There is no space to pack
or unpack my histories or my selves

I am trying to move
without attracting too much attention
to what I don't have
or what I have lost

or what has been stolen from me

The title of the poem denotes belonging or relating to a particular area or neighbourhood, and the knowledge that familiarity with a locality imparts.[1] However, we are again confronted with a paradox, since the poem addresses issues of *un*belonging—the alienating experience of not having the knowledge you're expected to have as a "local".

The speaker grapples with the limitations of her mother tongue, and this struggle is, significantly, articulated in English. The mother tongue is described as an allergy, a foreign irritant that has brought the speaker to an ontological impasse: the language does not accommodate the multiplicity of her being. The poem appears in the final section of the collection, among poems dealing with the ongoing legacy of apartheid as experienced by people of colour in South Africa. The problematic relationship that the speaker has with her mother tongue is thus also to be understood in terms of colonial and apartheid-era apparatuses of control. The speaker in Putuma's poem identifies a sense of loss, or lack—of something having been stolen from her—and in this identification, the poem stages the repercussions that the coloniality of knowledge and the coloniality of being have on the emerging subject.

In both collections, then, the reader finds reflections on the trauma that attends the loss of access to the mother tongue and the knowledge inscribed therein. However, traditional culture does not present an unproblematic alternative for the speakers, and both poets stage encounters between the speaker and traditional culture that reveal significant underlying tensions.

Busuku-Mathese's poem "Interview" (2016, 48) is structured as an interview. The form of the poem evokes the methodologies of Western knowledge frames associated with sociology, anthropology, and ethnography, and the attendant assumptions of objective observation that are related to these fields. This formal choice is performative, since it signals the assumed distance between interviewer and interviewee.

1 In other words, a "local" is one who is a native of or indigenous to a place.

At the start of the poem, for example, the interviewer makes a note to self: "On the middle knuckle of both hands, on the back of the neck and at the top of the sternum, old scars remain." This is an objective description of the scars on the interviewee's body. However, a reader familiar with South African traditional medicine practices might conclude that these are scars left by the small incisions through which *muti*—medicine used by indigenous healers to protect the user from the onslaught of malignant spiritual forces—has been administered to the interviewee. The interviewer appears unaware of this practice: when it becomes apparent that the scars were formed when the interviewee was ten years old, the interviewer asks: "Who mutilated you at 10 years old?" The interviewee explains that she "had demons; the inyanga made small cuts and rubbed muti inside for protection". As the interview progresses, we learn that the presence of these demons manifested in the form of the interviewee falling, her eyes rolling back, her whole body shaking, and her mouth doing "strange things". Asked whether she thinks the *inyanga*'s methods worked, the interviewee asserts that they did. The interviewer then asks:

> Q: And when was the first time you heard about epilepsy?
>
> A: 22 at a clinic in Umzimkhulu.
>
> Q: And how did you get from Matatiele to Umzimkhulu?
>
> A: I had to leave my first husband. They cursed him. They made him mad. He began to see black creatures coming from the roof, and then he didn't recognise me anymore and threatened to kill me. I know which women did it.
>
> Q: Have you ever heard of Bipolar disorder or schizophrenia?
>
> A: What's that?
>
> Q: Nothing, never mind. Epilepsy, what did you think when you found out you were simply epileptic?
>
> A: I didn't say I was epileptic.
>
> Q: Mom, you have to see that you were epileptic? Surely? And that your husband suffered from a psychological disorder?
>
> A: Can you switch that off now. Please, I'm tired. Please turn it off, now.
>
> *I didn't know*
>
> *I didn't know*
>
> *I didn't know so many old scars remained*

We thus learn that the interview is in fact being conducted by a daughter with her mother. The structure of the collection makes it safe to assume that it is the same mother and daughter from "A Fragment from Mother", discussed earlier. The reader must then re-evaluate the distance assumed by the interview format. This is, after all, not an objective encounter but a deeply personal one, between two seemingly irreconcilable epistemological frames: on the one hand, the indigenous beliefs and medicine practices

of the mother, inherited in turn from *her* mother, and on the other hand the daughter's discourse of Western medicine and psychiatry. The final lines, "*I didn't know / I didn't know / I didn't know so many old scars remained*", underscore the epistemic disjuncture experienced by the speaker in this encounter. The reader witnesses the moment when the speaker becomes aware of her lack of knowledge, and the shift into italics as well as the repetition of the phrase "I didn't know" suggest an inner voice and thoughts in turmoil. The physical scars noted at the start of the interview take on a metaphorical significance that extends beyond the mother to the daughter, and possibly also to the reader.

In Putuma's poem "Graduation" (2017, 35–37), a similar encounter between mother and daughter is staged, exemplified by the extracts that follow. Note, however, that in the original poem there are no stanza breaks, except after the line "And both are probably valid".

> Eventually
> When your mother asks
> Where you left the things she gave you
> You'll want to say, *I am unlearning them*
> But unlearning is not a real place or destination
> So you will choose to say you don't know and apologise out of habit
> You will realise you lost some stuff between loving and leaving your lovers
> You will realise your lovers gave you their mother's stuff, too
> And that maybe *unlearning* should be a place
> And all the womxn in your family should gather there more often
> Until *unlearning* is a tradition you can pass on to your children
>
> …
>
> The elders will no longer send you out of the room
> When unresolved family traumas ruin dinners
> You will want to facilitate
> Using a language of grieving that will be foreign to them
> You will realise the elders in the room
> Learned the alphabet of hurting and falling apart differently
> For you, healing looks like talking and transparency
> For them, it is silence and burying
> And both are probably valid

And
Then
You will realise
That
Coming home
And
Going home
Do not mean the same thing

Like Busuku-Mathese's "Interview", Putuma's "Graduation" reflects a moment of profound epistemological disjuncture. The poem adopts the second-person point of view, where the reader occupies the position of the addressee. This technique enjoins the reader to enter the poem as a participant in the situation described. The reader thus occupies two positions simultaneously: she is at once in the poem and also outside, observing it. Putuma deftly employs this sense of duality to underscore the poem's final insight: one can belong, and also not belong, at the same time.

In the first extract, as in Busuku-Mathese's "Interview", knowledge is passed from mother to daughter, and between womxn. Putuma's speaker envisions a womxn-centred, communal deconstruction of learnt knowledge, where the process of *unlearning* becomes its own tradition. This *unlearning* is a process or methodology by which knowledge that has been acquired may be re-evaluated and reintegrated or discarded.

The second extract comprises the last lines of the poem, and describes the confrontation that arises between generations when dealing with unresolved trauma. The speaker uses a "language of grieving" that entails "talking and transparency", in contrast to that of the elders, where healing is "silence and burying". Again, as in Busuku-Mathese's "Interview", the discourse of psychotherapy is presented as a response, or an alternative to the ways of healing inherited from the elders. The speaker foresees a future in which the tension generated by the conflict between the two epistemological frames can be accommodated, if not resolved.

The speaker acknowledges the validity of both paradigms, but the qualifier "probably" introduces uncertainty, and implies that there is some doubt about this. The uncertainty and subsequent revelation are emphasised by the only stanza break in the poem, at the end of the line "And both are probably valid". The stanza break creates a moment of suspension, and in this moment of ambivalence, the notion of "home" is unsettled for the speaker (and, through the use of the second-person point of view, for the reader). "Home"—a place of belonging— splits in two, and this split is marked by the verbs "coming" and "going". While the directional complement of "going" indicates a place where the speaker is not located, the place to which one speaks of something or somebody as "coming" is understood as a place where either the speaker or the

addressee is located.[2] According to this logic, we can thus read the poem's final stanza as follows: "coming home" implies movement to a place where "you" see "you" as located, while "going home" suggests movement to a place where "you" are not located. Home is where "you" are, but home is also where "you" are not.

It is this sense of discomfort with the site of enunciation—the place from which the "I" speaks—that is shared by both works, despite the differences in themes and subject matter. A close reading of the works suggests that the site of enunciation from which the subject of the work speaks is one in which that subject is not at ease, and strains against a full experience of being. The publication and recognition of these voices are promising indications that spaces are opening up in the realms of power and knowledge in which the subject positions articulated by these poets might find more room.

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2 See Fillmore (1971).

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