

Hullo, Bu-Bye, Koko, Come In.

Koleka Putuma.

Cape Town, Manyano Media, 2021. 123 pp.

ISBN 9781776302635.

With just over 110 pages, *Hullo, Bu-Bye, Koko, Come In* is heavy with the weight of Black women's history. It holds so much it is teeming, with poems pouring into the endnotes. At the book's conclusion, between each reference, a final poem takes shape: "We have come to bear witness / Here / Where Black girls do not die / For your amusement or pleasure" (122).

Putuma's voice is uncompromising and unflinching when it comes to addressing the erasure of Black women's histories. This extends to the erasure of Black people in general, speaking to how western empires have built themselves through exploitation of indigenous groups as well as through erasing their contributions. Her diagnosis of the problem is apt: "erasure is a synonym for the canon" (17). She opens the collection by inviting her reader to turn to writing as antidote: "writing / as it was / as it is // is how we exhume / the bodies / and give them / names" (14).

In *Hullo, Bu-Bye, Koko, Come In*, Putuma adds her perspective and her labour to the collective work of honouring the contributions of Black women to South Africa's history. As Simamkele Dlakavu (91) has highlighted, many Black feminist artists and activists have been engaged in challenging the erasure of Black women from South Africa's political history. While this collection has erasure as a central concern, it is not Putuma's first engagement with the subject matter. In "Lifeline", a poem in her debut collection *Collective Amnesia*, Putuma lists the names of 68 artists of colour,

and summarises their value to her, writing, “every name / chants / *Black girl—/ Live!*” (Putuma 82, emphasis in original).

In her latest work, Putuma extends this kind of memorialisation, adding breadth and width to the existing terrain. In a poem about women’s roles in the resistance movement against apartheid, she brings into the mainstream names like Elizabeth Mafekeng, Bertha Gxowa and many others, and places these alongside more familiar ones like Charlotte Mannya Maxeke and Lilian Ngoyi. Putuma underscores the various acts of resistance all these women engaged in: for instance, that Mafekeng led a union while Gxowa travelled nationwide collecting petition signatures ahead of the 1956 Women’s March (71–2).

Putuma does not, however, uncritically praise these apartheid-era women activists. In the same poem, she writes of ANC Women’s League President Bathabile Dlamini, “you feasted and served, alongside / comrades who built themselves bigger homes / with money that was meant to build homes for *the people* // you²² served this country with your silence, too / propped it up with your complicity, too” (75, emphasis and superscript in original)

Those familiar with Putuma’s debut collection know that she is incisive when it comes to laying out the texture of racism in South Africa. Who could forget her line in “1994: A love poem”, “I want someone who is going to look at me / and love me / the way that white people look at / and love / Mandela” (Putuma 100)? And I would bet that anyone who has ever heard Putuma recite “Water” still has goosebumps. The precision of her imagery and its familiarity gives Black people a sense of recognition. And in her latest work, when she offers commentary on experiences of racism in Europe, it is just as piercing.

Despite her success with European audiences, Putuma signals to the racism embedded in the experience: “europe asks if it can touch my hair / backspace / europe touches my hair” (22). The implication here and in similar poems is how, even at its best, the relationship between the African artist and Europe is non-reciprocal. Putuma notes how even whilst being exalted, her humanity is not fully recognised. She writes, “a visa with an expiry date / and a return ticket confirms / i will perform and leave / i will sign books / careful to be understood / careful to hear and spell each of their names correctly / while they mispronounce mine” (22).

It is poignant that Putuma addresses this experience of her success so honestly. Being included in spaces of prestige, as a multiply-marginalised person (in Putuma’s case, as a queer Black African woman)

sometimes carries an expectation that one should respond only with gratitude. However, as Putuma’s work shows, being included does not dent the brute force of colonialism’s history. Being included is not enough, not when white supremacy still dominates so much of the economic and social world. In another poem, she writes, “you are too ashamed / to also mention // there have been many times / you could not afford your own book” (36). In this, she further gestures to the reality of her success, exposing its less-than-glamorous aspects.

Putuma also addresses the ugly side of racial representation. Writing, “being *the first* / has black woman afraid / of breathing out of key // not in that room / not in that seat // with people attaching their oxygen / to hers” (37, emphasis in original), Putuma shows how being made the exception—the first of a marginalised group to achieve something—puts an inhumane burden on those it is imposed onto.

In this latest work, the dehumanisation of Black people is brought to the fore, particularly in relation to the experiences of women, activists and artists. Much of this is achieved through the intertextual. *Hullo, Bu-Bye, Koko, Come In* is interwoven with rich quotes by figures such as Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and Miriam Makeba, highlighting many facets of dehumanisation. One such quote by US poet, Jasmine Mans, simply reads, “They will stand at your grave / And demand an encore” (15), speaking to a depth of dehumanisation that extends beyond death. In this, Putuma signals to just how much is taken from Black people—from the artefacts exhibited in Western museums, to lifetimes of labour.

In *Hullo, Bu-Bye, Koko, Come In*, Koleka Putuma plays with form and intertextuality in fresh and unapologetically experimental ways. I nostalgically enjoyed her references to childhood, like the speaker of “you belong here” aspiring to be a YoTV presenter and licking “drink-o-pop powder and yoguetta from [her] fingers” (109). Much of the book covers serious subject matter, illustrating the everyday manifestations of colonialism’s afterlives, here and elsewhere. In it, Putuma’s voice and point of view is honest and assertive. As valuable as it is for literary analysis, I also think the collection makes a valuable resource for teaching historiography, because of the intricate attention paid to erasure and dehumanisation. Hopefully, if works like Putuma’s are taken more seriously, they can help us refashion the world into one where we will not have to “smile with the injury of [our] ancestors still haemorrhaging on [our] face[s]” (23).

Works cited

Dlakavu, Simamkele. "‘Say No, Black Woman’: The Giant is Falling and the erasure of Black women in South Africa." *Agenda* vol. 31, nos. 3–4, 2017, pp. 89–95. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2017.1391615>.
Putuma, Koleka. *Collective Amnesia*. Uhlanga, 2017.

Gorata Chengeta**chengetag@gmail.com****University of the Witwatersrand****Johannesburg, South Africa**ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7532-4697>DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v59i1.12693>