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IN THE "WATERS" OF SOUTH AFRICAN POET KOLEKA PUTUMA: A DIASPORIC VOICE CONFRONTING HISTORY

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Abstract

This article studies the poem "Water" by the young South African poet and playwright Koleka Putuma. It considers issues such as the trajectory of the diaspora, the disregard for bodies discarded in the Black Atlantic, and the religious, moral and historical impositions on survivors. It also considers the lingering fear experienced by the descendants of Africans who were forced to undertake the journey. Moreover, it demonstrates the potential for historical reinterpretation through poetry. Lyricism can be a form of protest and engagement. To this end, the works of Frantz Fanon (1963; 1986), Angela Davis (1974), Édouard Glissant (1997) and Paul Gilroy (1993), among others, were used for theoretical support. The aim is to immerse the readers in the historical reality usurped by the coloniser and enable them to discover new narratives through the poetic voice.

Keywords: "Water"; Koleka Putuma; Black Atlantic journey; Poetry; Retelling history.

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Introduction

The South African poet, playwright and director Koleka Putuma (born 1993) has been described as "a young genius" by her fellow countryman actor, director and writer Bongani Madondo (2017). Others, such as writer and photographer Sabelo Mkhabela (2017, 01), present her as the "groundbreaking new voice of South African poetry". Abdon (2018, 52) adds that she is the best-selling poet in South African history. Beyond praise, this article discusses how the powerful voice of the poet echoes the transition between two worlds: Africa and America, and their shared history of slavery. To this end, the award-winning and acclaimed poem "Water" was selected to explore the themes of diaspora and forced migration in past centuries.

The poem was published in Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* (uHlanga Press, 2017) and, according to the review on the poet's webpage (Putuma, 2025), the book is now in its 12th print run. Gantsho (2017, 77) informs that five thousand copies were sold in its first year of publication, and Putuma performed it across the continents.

Essentially, this study focuses on the author's renowned video performance of "Water" (2016), for which she won the PEN South Africa Student Writing Prize. Putuma was also crowned South Africa's national Slam Poetry Champion in 2014 and has been listed among the top ten poets by the online archive and Pan-African poetry platform Badilisha Poetry X-Change (Mbambe 2016). Furthermore, the poet studied for a BA degree in Theatre and Performance at the University of Cape Town and is currently the founder and director of Manyano Media, "a multidisciplinary creative company that empowers and produces stories by queer women" (Putuma, 2025, 01). Not only in the field of poetry, but also in theater, Putuma has won numerous awards, including the following: "[…] the Imbewu Trust Scribe Playwriting Award, Mbokodo Rising Light award, CASA playwriting award and the 2019 Distell Playwriting Award for her play 'No Easter Sunday for Queers'" (Putuma, 2025), among others.

Regarding "Water", it is also important to note that the analysis of the poem in this study is related to the video performance[1], "directed by Ecuadorian José Cardoso featuring Putuma herself and released one year before the collection came out" (Guarducci 2024, 157). We chose the video performance over the written version because it conveys the power of the poet's speech and her decolonizing perspective on slavery and the Atlantic crossing. The oral force of the poem is deeply felt due to the flowing, rhythmic nature of Putuma's spoken-word tradition, meaning the poetic images do not vanish on the page, but reverberate in our ears, eager to capture the lyricism of struggle.

The Black Atlantic and the violence of displacement: an African complaint

Koleka Putuma was just a 23-year-old university student when she won the PEN South Africa Student Writing Prize. Despite her young age at the time, her poem "Water" addresses difficult issues such as the violence of forced migration

and the enslavement of African people. The opening verses evoke the "memory of going to the beach every New Year's eve" with her folks and how "the elders would forbid [them] from going in too deep" (Putuma 2016, 54s). This memory is shared with "cousins" and "people raised black", indicating that the lyric self is keen to connect with individuals who echo the same ethnic backgrounds, establishing a sense of collective identity from the outset.

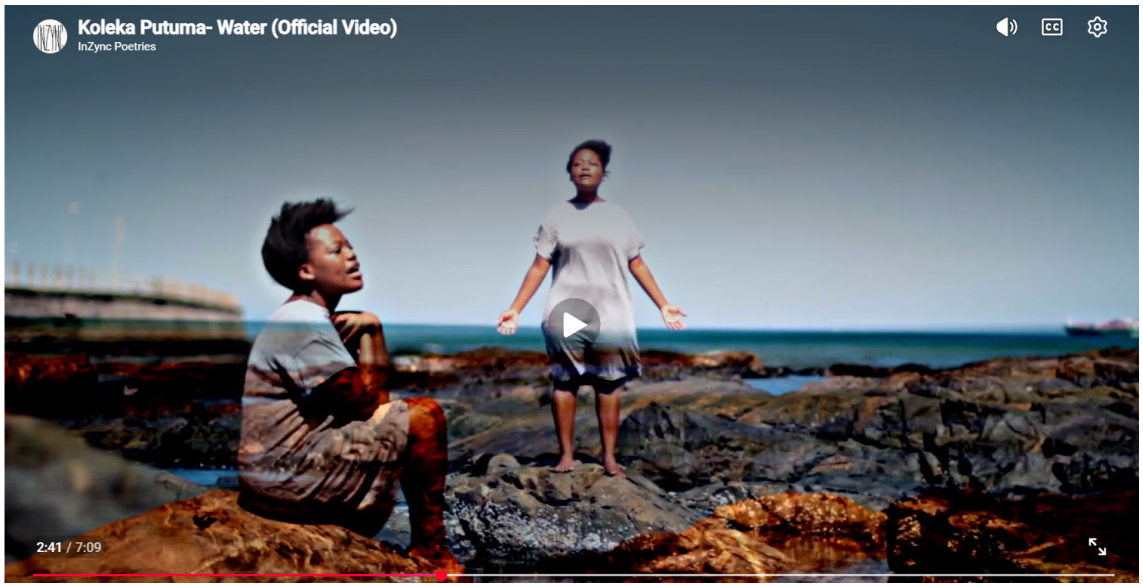
In a 2019 essay, Toni Morrison discusses that it is important to make "effort[s] to substitute and rely on memory rather than history", as she cannot "trust recorded history" to give her "the insights" demanded when reflecting and writing. Indeed, this is the path followed by the African poet: she rejects the "official" voice of the coloniser and instead brings to the fore the presence of the "elders", who advised on how the black youngsters should behave: they were forbidden "to giggle" and to "rid[e] the waves" as a result of trauma, out of "fear" that they could become "a mass of blackness" and be "swept by the tide" forever, "like litter" (Putuma 2016, 1m07s).

When the poet incorporates "litter" into her lyrical composition, she is referring to the Black bodies that crossed the Atlantic as "non-humans", just as the colonisers once established. In *On the Postcolony* (2001), Cameroonian philosopher and political scientist Achille Mbembe sheds light on the issue of violence attached to death in the colonial encounter. The author explains that this *modus operandi* of death has spread its tentacles around the world in such a way that the mass murder of the colonised Black bodies has become normalized over the centuries. Mbembe (200, 04) also points out the fact that "More than any other region, Africa, thus, stands out as the supreme receptacle of the West's obsession with, and circular discourse about, the facts of 'absence', 'lack' and 'non-being' of identity and difference, of negativeness – in short, nothingness".

The concept of "nothingness" was prevalent among colonial philosophers during the era of slavery, including the philosopher Georg Hegel, who justified racism with the following argument: "The Negro […] exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. […]. There is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character" (1975, 96).

Against this nefarious idea, Putuma's poetry of resistance does not arrange words randomly; her words rather establish a connection to meaning. In this context, "Water" brings Black bodies characterized as a "mass of blackness", dehumanized, amalgamated as "trash", as tradable bodies. In fact, Segal (1995, 04) estimates that approximately 12.5 million Africans were violently shipped to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade (1501-1866), with around 10.7 million surviving the brutal journey, representing one of the most devastating forced migrations in history (Manning 1992, 119). In fact, the Black Atlantic crossing was part of a "micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion", i.e., the ships themselves, which "focus attention on the middle passage, […] on the circulation of ideas" (Gilroy, 1993, 04). Ships also symbolize the "ontological rupture" suffered by each African individual in the middle passage (222).

Figure 1: Overlaid images of Koleka Putuma in the video performance of "Waters"[2]



Nevertheless, in "Water" the poetic self brings the Black body into contact with the barbarism of the coloniser, creating a sensory metaphor for how the older Africans think about the sea: they forbid access to it, "as if the ocean has food poisoning" (Putuma 2016, 1m16s). If the ocean is poisoned, it means that Black bodies were thrown into the sea like rotten meat during the crossings. Remarkably, the sea "vomits" these bodies, which were sacrificed for the sake of the coloniser's greed. Columbia University Professor Saidiya Hartman (2021) points out that the deaths of enslaved people were "incidental" to the acquisition of profit, occurring because the life of the African had "no normative value" in early capitalism (31). These deaths, which "poisoned" the waters, were due to "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (6).

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon (1963) criticizes the hypocritical "racist humanism" of the coloniser, stating that "the well-being and the progress of Europe have been built up with the sweat and the dead of bodies of negroes", and that "European opulence is literally scandalous, for it has been founded on slavery" (96). By depicting the coloniser's disregard for the dire living conditions endured by enslaved people and the diaspora, Koleka Putuma writes an antiracist pedagogical poem, drawing the reader's attention to the fact that the drama of the Black Atlantic "constitute[s] the ground swell of modernity" (Chambers 1994, 16).

Another important aspect of the poem is that the "elder" represents an uprising voice, highlighting the shared ancestral fear that affects the lyric self's life, as she senses she is "drowning every time [she looks] out into the sea" (Putuma 2016, 1m19s). She feels "incredibly small" when confronting the sea, as if the ancestral echoes of slavery could run in her blood and soul: "Yet every time our skin goes under / It's as if the reeds remember that they were once chains" (Putuma 2016, 1m54s). The poet seems to experience "the abyss [that] lies inside and outside the abyss", as Édouard Glissant (1997, 07) writes in *Poetics of Relation*.

In her present time, the poet revives "the torment of those who never escaped it: straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violent belly of the ocean depths they went" (07).

Nevertheless, the feeling of "smallness" experienced when in contact with the ocean is an inherent part of her ethnicity. The poetic persona "often hear[s]" the "joke" about "Black people not being able to swim" or even "being scared of water" (Putuma 2016, 1m30s). This anecdote stems from the colonisers' lack of an abysmal ancestral connection to the ocean. They project racist laughter and judgement onto the African subjects, mocking Black people's "postures and kink": "They mock us / For not being able to throw ourselves into something that was instrumental in trying to execute our extinction." (Putuma 2016, 2m28s).

This difference in perspective is one of the tension axes of the poem: while the coloniser takes the ocean as a place "for surf boards, boats and tans" (Putuma 2016,1m34s), Black people see it as having a mystical meaning. They "have come to be baptized", to "cleanse" themselves in the waters, and to "connect" their "living to the dead" (Putuma, 2014, 2m43s). The South African poet speaks for those who were once silenced, recreating the movements of her ancestors and wishing the water "could spew all of the slaves and ships onto shore. Whole as they had boarded, sailed and sunk" (2016, 1m56s). The sibilant sounds gently emerge from the poet's mouth as we picture the circularity of history. Caught up in this movement, the lyric voice responds sharply to all the mockery: "Our respect for water is what you have termed fear" (Putuma 2016, 2m54s).

The "respect" that the poet addresses in her text is centred on the "Black Atlantic" concept, which, according to Gilroy (1993, 80), consists of a "diaspora still indispensable in focusing on the political and ethical dynamics of the unfinished history of blacks in the modern World". In other words, it is a form of "respect" for African history and for the "tears" that "have turned the ocean salty" (Putuma 2016, 2m09s). This synaesthesia of salty tears is felt not only on the tongue, but also in the "irises" that "burn every time" the descendants "go under" the waters of slavery (Putuma 2016, 2m10s). Remarkably, the poet states that on important historical dates such as 16 December, when South Africa celebrates the Day of Reconciliation (a national holiday that came into effect in 1995 following the fall of apartheid) and on Eurocentric dates such as 24 and 31 December, the skin of Black people "re-traumatises the sea" (Putuma 2016, 2m19s).

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon (1986, 118) mentions that the psychoanalysts understand "that nothing is more traumatizing for the young child than his encounters with what is rational". However, he takes this idea further and states that "for a man whose only weapon is reason there is nothing more neurotic than contact with unreason" (118). Therefore, the trauma suffered by the lyric persona is not only related to the reality of facts, but also to the unreasonable traditions that South African Black citizens have followed for years, such as Christian-based dates and a special day of "Reconciliation", based on the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). Afterwards, Black and indigenous South Africans, who were not given the right to vote, protested against racial discrimination on 16

December, 1910. Over a century later, Putuma writes her protest poetry and the trauma remains, in a circle of racism and domination.

Back to Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), he accounts for the "horror of modern life", that was "originated in slavery and stood at the center of a space unevenly triangulated by industrialization, capitalism, and the institution of […] government" (172). The trauma remains in the poem as the lyric self realizes the "audacity" of the colonial tormentor who "arrive[d] by water and invade[d]" the African land, and did not experience ethical & moral dilemmas when "trad[ing] and murder[ing]" Black people "over water" (Putuma 2016, 2m57s).

Verse after verse, the poet evokes the "abyss" of the sea. Glissant (1997) justifies this "tautology": "Navigating the green splendor of the sea […] in melancholic transatlantic crossings […], the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning […]" (06).

In poetry, especially oral African poetry, repetition is a method to emphasize the significance of information to the recipient of the spoken message. Nigerian Professor Charles Bodunde (1992) outlines African oral art as a "complex corpus" filled with "ideas, beliefs, symbols, assumptions, attitude and sentiments of peoples" (24), offering a powerful means of recreating the past. Through repetition, Putuma recreates in her poem the sorrow, fear and trauma experienced by the African Black population.

Right at this point, Putuma (2016) introduces a new approach in her poem: confrontation. She defies the coloniser directly, as if looking them in the eye: "If this land was really yours, then resurrect the bones of the colonisers and use them as a compass" (3m07s). By calling on the colonisers to "resurrect the bones" of their ancestors, the poet travels back in time to show that the African land never belonged to invaders – despite their arrival on caravels, guided by their "compass", changing the history of the continent forever. Armed with a sense of defiance, she demands that the heirs of the invaders "quit using black bodies as tour guides or the site for your authentic African experience", highlighting the centuries-old exploitation of Black bodies: "Are we not tired of dancing for you?" (Putuma 2016, 3m18s).

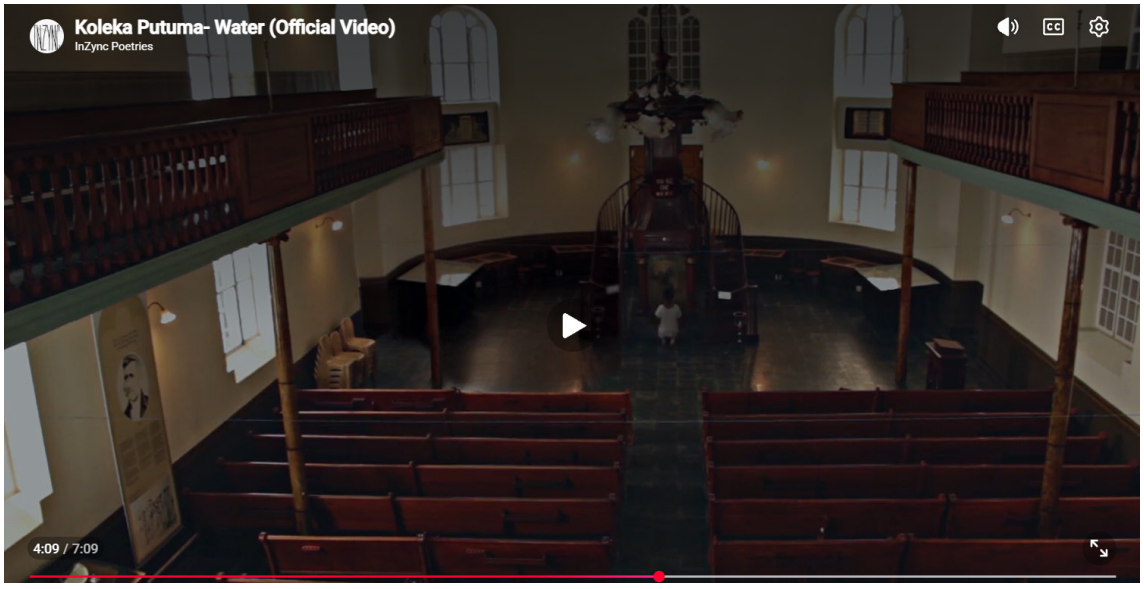
In the following verse, the poetic persona shifts the focus of the dialogue towards Black people themselves, asking: "Are we not tired of gathering as a mass of blackness?" (3m23s). She follows up with her complaint, asking if her kin are not tired of "beg[ging] God" to "save" them from "a war" they "never started", and of "march[ing] for a cause caused by the intolerance for [their] existence" (Putuma 2016, 3m29s). Once again, we see that poetic repetition is not random: the guttural sound of the 'c' in 'cause' and 'caused' serves as a powerful cue to pause, so that we pay attention to the speech.

The initial melancholic lament turns into rebellion: "Raise our hands so we don't get shot / Raise our hands in church to pray for protection / And we still get shot there too / With our hands raised" (Putuma 2016, 3m36s). By working poetically with the repetition of "raised hands", the author demonstrates two

aspects of colonial rage: the physical violence of invaders shooting at Black bodies, even in sacred spaces like churches; and the psychological violence, in which the Christian religion of the coloniser becomes the "official" one to be followed: "Invasion comes naturally for your people / So you have come to rob us of our places of worship too" (Putuma 2016, 3m54). In the video, the poet whispers these words as she wanders through a Catholic church. This setting is very different from the oceanfront landscapes we have seen so far, and emphasizes the erasure of African geography and religion as part of the colonial epistemology of denial and destruction.

With regard to this epistemological erasure, Angela Davis writes in her *Autobiography* (1974) that Black people "were chained to a vicious circle of violence", where opposing forces were constantly forcing them "to retreat in fear": "we always expected the violence, we knew it was coming, though we could never predict the next target" (60). We can relate the poet's feelings of revolt to this quote about expecting violence, as it reinforces the idea that "too many white people" took the liberty of "acting like God" (Putuma 2016, 4m03s). She continues to whisper, as if she were praying.

Figure 2: The poet is on her knees in a church"[3]



However, this near-silence does not last, and it bursts forth unexpected turns: the voice no longer speaks to its own people or the colonisers, but instead directly challenges the Eurocentric concept of God imposed by the dominant as the sole truth: "And this God of theirs has my tummy in knots / Him and I have always had a complicated relationship" (Putuma 2016, 4m19s). In the video, she looks directly up at the Holy Cross while speaking. Firstly, the God that makes the poetic presence feel disgusted and confused does not physically resemble her. It is the "blue-eyed and blond-haired Jesus" that she had to follow "in Sunday school", and she realizes that he obliged her "kind" to bow "to a white and patriarchal

heaven", "to a Christ, his son, and 12 disciples" (Putuma 2016, 4m31s). Fanon (1963) states that the "Church in the colonies is the white people's Church, the foreigner's Church. She does not call the native to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor" (42).

By rebelling against the imposed standards, the poetic voice begins to recreate its own religious system. It tells the reader that "the disciples could have been queer, the holy trinity some weird, twisted love triangle / And the Holy Ghost transgender" (Putuma 2016, 4m45s). It is relevant to note that Koleka Putuma is renowned for fighting for queer rights and visibility in the South African arts scene. In an interview, the author says, "Varsity fucked up my Christianity. […]" (quoted in Mũrĩithi 2017). In fact, her play *No Easter Sunday for Queers* (2019), a drama about religion and queerness based on one of her poems, won the 2019 Distell National Playwright Competition, as mentioned previously. This demonstrates how her poetic voice is intertwined with her poetic discourse. In this sense, she embodies what Brazilian author Conceição Evaristo (2020) refers to as "writing-living" (escrevivência), a genuine form of writing by Black women. As Evaristo herself puts it: "I place myself and speak out to affirm my African origins and celebrate my ancestry and connect both with African peoples and with the African diaspora" (30 – our translation)[4].

Indeed, Koleka performs as a writer who is committed to social causes, such as the fight against racism and in favor of minorities, such as queer people. Her "Holy Ghost" is "transgender", even though mainstream Christianity considers this verse blasphemous. However, Putuma does not usher in a reinterpretation of the Christian Holy Spirit. In the poem "Menino Jesus" ("Baby Jesus"), Alberto Caeiro, one of Fernando Pessoa's heteronyms, dares to call the Holy Spirit a "stupid dove", "the only ugly dove in the world", which "scratches itself with his beak, perches on chairs, and dirties them" (1988, 188 – our translation)[5]. Caeiro speaks from a pagan perspective, while in her poem, Putuma addresses the rejection of the imposition of Eurocentric religiosity on her own life and that of her originally animist people. She says: "But you will only choose to understand the scriptures that suit your agenda / You have taken the liberty to colonise the concept of God" (Putuma 2016, 4m54s).

Glissant (1997) points out that in Western mythologies, "Christ is above all the Son. He consecrates filiation" (48). Putuma (2016, 4m58s) takes the analysis further, observing that the coloniser "gave god a gender, a skin colour and a name in a language we had to twist our mouths around". In a decolonial manner, the author writes 'god' in lowercase letters, thereby removing the Christian entity's primacy of existence. The coloniser gave God "a gender" (patriarchal: "he"), "a skin colour" (racist: white) and a "language" (hegemonic: English), so the colonised had no choice but to accept this imposition through physical and symbolic violence.

Fanon (1963) argues that "in the colonial context the settler only ends his work of breaking in the native when the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the white man's values" (43). Putuma (2016) engages

in dialogue with the Martinican author on the subject of moral and ethical concepts: "Blasphemy is wrapping Slavery in the Gospel and calling it freedom / Blasphemy is having to watch my kind use the same gospel to enslave each other" (5m05s). If the violence of slavery is "wrapped" in the coloniser's gospel, then "blasphemy" takes on a new meaning: the subjugated must also subjugate their fellows in a chain of domination and subservience. *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) quotes: "Every effort is made to bring the colonised person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behavior, […] and, in the last extreme, the confused and imperfect character of his own biological structure" (236).

In his essay "Religion in Africa during the colonial era", Ghanaian Professor Kofi Asare Opoku (1985) writes that "Armed with the conviction of possessing the only truth, missionaries condemned all that was 'pagan'" (526). He conjectures that they preached against all traditional African practices, including drumming, dancing and rites of passage. These Western religious figures also denied the existence of the polytheistic gods and other supernatural powers which Africans believed in. "On the whole, becoming a Christian meant, to a large extent, ceasing to be an African and using European culture as a point of reference. Thus, Christianity had a disintegrating effect on African culture" (526).

Historically, "Water" brings issues of religious domination long before the arrival of European caravels in Africa: "Since the days of Elijah we have been engineered to kneel to whiteness / And we are not even sure if the days of Elijah even existed / Because whoever wrote the bible did not include us" (Putuma 2016, 5m18s). Recalling the myth of Elijah, whose Hebrew etymology means "My God is Jah/YHWH", he is revered as a prophet who lived in Israel during the reign of King Ahab in the 9th century BC (Barton; Muddiman 2007, 246). In the *Books of Kings*, part of the *Hebrew Bible*, Elijah performs miracles such as resurrection and ascends to heaven (2 Kings 2:11 quoted in Myers 1965, 121). Due to his status as a well-established mythical figure, references to Elijah also appear in the *New Testament*, the *Quran*, the *Talmud*, the *Book of Mormon* and the *Bahá'í writings*. Nonetheless, scholars discuss that he is more of a legendary figure than a historically accurate one (McLeish, 1996, 506).

In addition to questioning Elijah's historical immanence and exposing the fact that the Christian Bible does not include Africans, Putuma (2016, 3m27s) challenges the oppressor in the following verse: "But I would rather exist in that god-less holy book than in the history books that did not tell truth". By bringing up the issue of "truth", the poet challenges official history, or, as Glissant (1997) exposes: "within the collective books concerning the sacred and the notion of history lies the germ of the exact opposite of what they so loudly proclaim" (15).

Putuma insists that, like the Bible, history books did not present facts "about", "for" or "on behalf" of African people. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1837), Hegel conceives history as a dialectical process, placing Africa out of world history: "Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained […] shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself – the land of

childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night" (1975, 196).

Aware of the coloniser's domination of narratives, the poetic self emphasizes the impact of the invader on the bodies and minds of Africans, particularly those who survived the journey to the New World as slaves. The authorial self takes ownership of history, abandoning the truths invented by the oppressor. Once again, the poetic voice confronts the coloniser: "If you really had to write our stories / Then you ought to have done it in our mother's tongues / The ones you cut off when you fed them a new language" (Putuma 2016, 5m38s).

The issue of mother tongue is vital to the poet's argument: the perpetrators of slavery did not only retell history from their point of view but did so through their mastery of dialects and vocabulary. Fanon (1963) outlines that "a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language", and that "[m]astery of language affords remarkable power" (18). This raises the question: why were the colonised prevented from speaking their own language? The answer is obvious: if language is power, then those who have been submitted should never be allowed to retain identity traits such as communication skills, "mastery of language" and a sense of history.

Putuma (2016) puts into words that Black Africans "never consent" to these burdens and exploitation, yet they "are asked to dine with the oppressors" (5m47s). At this point in the poem, the reader reaches a circle, a turning point where the slaves, once cast adrift on the high seas as "trash", leaving the waters "poisoned", are now invited to dine with their tormentors. However, this is not a shared supper; on the contrary, the diaspora is invited to "serve" the coloniser "forgiveness", which is impossible since "the only ingredients" the poetic self has to offer are "grief and rage" (Putuma 2016, 5m50s).

These uncomfortable feelings are caused by the violent acts committed against her peers: "Another one (who looks like me) was murdered today" (Putuma 2016, 6m01s). Once again, violence becomes a central issue in the poem, signaling that no Black person is immune from being murdered – a reality that has endured for centuries. This is why the poetic voice is in need to speak out unpleasant truths, as Angela Davis (1974) weighs up: "If we know, and do nothing, we are worse than the murderers hired in our name" (251).

During dinner, the poet suggests that the theme of epistemic and material violence against black people should be discussed at the "table"; only "thereafter" both Black people and their oppressors will be able to "wash this bitter meal with amnesia" (Putuma 2016, 6m07s). The synesthesia of the sea waters reappears, no longer attempting to digest the flesh of those who died during the Atlantic crossing, but washing it away with the acidic power of "amnesia". In this sense, forgetting is the only possibility for pacification. This is contradictory, however, since the poetic voice has until now risen in an epic attempt to survive and remember. To retell. To preserve the stories of the diaspora.

By the end of the poem, the lyrical voice sounds quite ironic, suggesting that her fearful fellows should "go for a swim" in the sea, "just for fun" (Putuma

2016, 6m11s). The author concludes her lyrical complaint with a discourse that is as hypocritical as that of the coloniser. During the Atlantic crossing, the bodies of African ancestors were left behind and thrown into the sea like rubbish. Not even the sea, with its centuries-old movement of salts and acids, could digest so much death, neglect and violence. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the irony lies in the fact that, despite showing engagement throughout "Water", the poet ultimately proposes that the text should end as a work of entertainment. Putuma (2016) does not back down an inch; she knows that poems carry historical weight, and that these stories need to be retold, reflected upon and reinvented by invisible voices. And if such voices cannot be heard, then let the poet speak on their behalf.

Video performance of "Water", by Koleka Putuma (2016):

The memory of going to the beach every New Year's eve
Is one I share with cousins and most people raised black
How the elders would forbid us from going in too deep
To giggle, to splash in our black tights and Shoprite plastic bags wrapped around our new weaves, forbid us from riding the wave,
For fear that we would be a mass of blackness swept by the tide
And never to return
Like litter.
The elders forbid us as if the ocean has food poisoning
I often wonder why I feel as if I am drowning every time I look out into the sea
This and feeling incredibly small
And I often hear this joke
About Black people not being able to swim,
Or being scared of water;
We are mocked
And we have often mocked ourselves
For wiping our faces the way that we do when we come out of the water-
Compare it to how they do it all bay-watch like
And how we so ratchet-like with our postures and kink.
Yet every time our skin goes under
It's as if the reeds remember that they were once chains
And the water, restless, wishes it could spew all of the slaves and ships onto shore
Whole as they had boarded, sailed and sunk
Their tears are what have turned the ocean salty,
This is why our irises burn every time we go under.
Every December sixteenth, December 24th and December 31st
Our skin re-traumatises the sea
They mock us
For not being able to throw ourselves into something that was instrumental in trying to execute our extinction.
For you, the ocean is for surf boards, boats and tans

And all the cool stuff you do under there in your bathing suits and goggles
But we, we have come to be baptised here
We have come to stir the other world here
We have come to cleanse ourselves here
We have come to connect our living to the dead here
Our respect for water is what you have termed fear
The audacity to trade and murder us over water
Then mock us for being scared of it
The audacity to arrive by water and invade us
If this land was really yours, then resurrect the bones of the colonisers and use them as a compass
Then quit using black bodies as tour guides or the site for your authentic African experience
Are we not tired of dancing for you?
Gyrating and singing on cue
Are we not tired of gathering as a mass of blackness?
To atone for just being here
To beg God to save us from a war we never started
To March for a cause caused by the intolerance for our existence
Raise our hands so we don't get shot
Raise our hands in church to pray for protection
And we still get shot there too
With our hands raised
Invasion comes naturally for your people
So you have come to rob us of our places of worship too
Come to murder us in prisons too
That is not new either
Too many white people out here acting God
Too many white people out here doing the work of God,
And this God of theirs has my tummy in knots
Him and I have always had a complicated relationship
This blue eyed and blond haired Jesus I followed in Sunday school
Has had my kind bowing to a white and patriarchal heaven
Bowing to a Christ, his son, and 12 disciples
For all we know
the disciples could have been queer, the holy trinity some weird twisted love triangle
And the Holy Ghost transgender
But you will only choose to understand the scriptures that suit your agenda
You have taken the liberty to colonise the concept of God
Gave god a gender, a skin colour and a name in a language we had to twist our mouths around
Blasphemy is wrapping Slavery in the Gospel and calling it freedom
Blasphemy is having to watch my kind use the same gospel to enslave each other
Since the days of Elijah We have been engineered kneel to whiteness
And we are not even sure if the days of Elijah even existed
Because whoever wrote the bible did not include us
But I would rather exist in that god-less holy book than in the history

books that did not tell truth
About us
For us
On behalf of us
If you really had to write our stories
Then you ought to have done it in our mother's tongues
The ones you cut off when you fed them a new language

We never consent
Yet we are asked to dine with the oppressors
And Serve them forgiveness
How, when the only ingredients I have are grief and rage

Another one (who looks like me) died today
Another one (who looks like me) was murdered today

May that be the conversation at the table
And we can all thereafter wash this bitter meal with amnesia

And go for a swim after that
Just for fun.
Just for fun.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT: Does not apply.

End notes

1. As the poem is performed at: https://www.kolekaputuma.com/poetry-more?pgid=klq7xeeb-e38243c2-5e1b-43b2-b1c8-198a451ae393, the methodology of this text uses 'seconds' and 'minutes' instead of 'pages' as references.
2. Available at: https://www.kolekaputuma.com/poetry-more?pgid=klq7xeeb-e38243c2-5e1b-43b2-b1c8-198a451ae393. Accessed 21 Nov. 2025.
3. Available at: https://www.kolekaputuma.com/poetry-more?pgid=klq7xeeb-e38243c2-5e1b-43b2-b1c8-198a451ae393. Accessed 21 Nov. 2025.
4. "[...] me coloco e me pronuncio para afirmar a minha origem de povos africanos e celebrar a minha ancestralidade e me conectar tanto com os povos africanos, como com a diáspora africana".
5. "[...] pomba estúpida. *A única pomba feia do mundo*"; "E o Espirito Santo coça-se com o bico / E empoleira-se nas cadeiras e suja-as".

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