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Of Speaking and Visibility: The Intersectional Resistance and Resilience of Black Women in Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia*, vangile gantsho's *red cotton* and danai mupotsa's *feeling and ugly*

By

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Declaration

I, Yonwaba Matshobotiyana, declare that this thesis hereby submitted for the qualification of Master of Arts (English) at the University of the Free State is my own work and that I have not previously submitted the same work at another university.

Signature:

Date: 29 November 2024

Dedication

To my late dog, Simba. I have learned to feel so much.

To my 40-year-old self. I hope you have learned to be easy on yourself. Read this work, unless you are dead.

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Abstract

Black women's voices in South Africa, particularly in poetry, have long lingered on the periphery, and their current resurgence marks a pivotal juncture that speaks to the conditions of Black social life, particularly of Black women and Black queer women. In their literary works, Black women poets dare to assert their voices, reclaim their narratives, disrupt the status quo and foster futurity-oriented sociabilities. Despite the burgeoning richness of the canon of Black women's poetry in South Africa, scholarly attention to it remains scant. Thus, this study aims to reduce this gap by attending to the Black women's voices that pervade the warp and weft of the selected texts: *Collective Amnesia* (2017) by Koleka Putuma, *red cotton* (2018) by vangile gantsho and *feeling and ugly* (2018) by danai mupotsa. The study examines the intersectional resistance and resilience strategies employed by the three poets to disrupt systems of power such as racism, the white gaze, white heteropatriarchy, patriarchy and the hegemony of heteronormativity. In recognising the symbiotic relationship between acts of resistance and resilience, the study contends that these forces mutually reinforce each other in the contestation of power structures. The study uses Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality and Fred Moten's (2003) concept of fugitivity as key guiding analytic tools. The study is guided by the following key questions: 1) How do the three Black women poets under study assert their voices and establish their visibility within a literary canon that has historically devalued the contributions of Black women? 2) How do the Black women in the three collections articulate resistance and resilience to challenge power structures? 3) What new possibilities and perspectives does the resurgence of Black women's poetry offer to Black life and the Black female body?

Keywords: Black women poetry, Black women, the Black female body, resistance, resilience, intersectionality, fugitivity, South Africa

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Chapter 1: Introduction

What do we want from each other after we have told our stories?

—Audre Lorde, "There Are No Honest Poems About Dead Women" (1986)

1.1 Background

Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* (2018), vangile gantsho's *red cotton* (2018) and danai mupotsa's *feeling and ugly* (2018) resonate squarely with the ethos of speaking and visibility that the post-apartheid canon of Black women's poetry embodies. The three poets centre the Black woman's voice, positioning it as an insistent charge, a force that disrupts colonial and apartheid legacies of control and subordination as well as the manifold violences of patriarchy. They also reclaim the Black female body from oppressive histories, the white gaze, white heteropatriarchy, patriarchy, and the hegemony of heteronormativity. While they share these foundational aims, each poet approaches this work uniquely. Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* (2017) interrogates the complexities of Black existence in post-transitional South Africa. Her poetry examines what it means to live as Black, as a woman, and as queer in a society still haunted by the injustices of its past. vangile gantsho's poetry novella, *red cotton* (2018), depicts its protagonist, smallgirl, as a disruptor of patriarchy and its acts of violence. Through smallgirl's narratives, readers are exposed to the harsh realities of patriarchy's asphyxiating noose and the strategies that could be used to untie it. danai mupotsa's *feeling and ugly* (2018) takes a more intimate turn, situating the Black female body as a locus of feeling, agency, and expression. It foregrounds the Black female body as an entity with its feeling appetites to feed.

I open the chapter by mapping the historical and literary trajectory of Black women's speaking and visibility, charting how these have been systematically constrained and regulated from the colonial and apartheid eras. This contextual exploration lays the groundwork for examining the post-apartheid reclamation of literary space by Black women poets, whose voices now assert themselves with transformative power. The selected texts—Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* (2017), gantsho's *red cotton* (2018), and mupotsa's *feeling and ugly* (2018)—are read as critical interventions, challenging a literary tradition that once marginalised and silenced Black women. I then turn to my conceptualisation of resistance and resilience as symbiotic forces that reinforce each other, through which I read the resistance and resilience strategies present in the three texts under study. The theoretical architecture of this study is underpinned by Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality and Fred Moten's (2003) fugitivity. Due to the vastness of the texts being studied, the study adopts a multi-theoretical approach. It incorporates Andrew Brooks' (2020) concept of fugitive listening, Helene Strauss' (2022) concept of resonant feminist listening, Jovan Lewis' (2023) notion of fugitive repair, Audre Lorde's (1984) erotic and Sarah Ahmed's (2014) sticky affects. The research objectives, questions, methodology and design are delineated before I conclude the chapter with an outline of the chapters that make up the thesis.

1.2 Of speaking and visibility

The South African literary space has long been a contested site, shaped by the scars of colonial and apartheid legacies that sought to regulate who could speak and who could be seen. For a long time, it remained a terrain where racial and gendered hierarchies, enshrined in law and ideology (patriarchy and racism), dictated whose voices could be heard and whose bodies could occupy the public stage. Access to the literary space was tightly guarded,

privileging a racial and patriarchal imaginary that thrived on the suppression of Black[1] subjectivities, particularly those of women (Gqola, 2011; Boswell, 2010, 2016, 2017). Black women writers were systemically stifled not only by the apartheid system but also by the patriarchal currents within Black intellectual and cultural circles (see for instance Mofokeng, 1989; Driver, 1996). Even within the archives of African-centred literary criticism, Black male poets dominate the critical records, while Black women remain disproportionately underrepresented. As it is, "very little research has targeted Black women writers, as knowledge and content producers, through the medium of books, let alone poets" (Xaba, 2018: 18). This is the lacuna that this thesis attempts to bridge.

Truly, Black women's earliest writings, particularly of the twentieth century, tend to slip into the uncharted recesses of history, overlooked and misremembered. The earliest accessible poem by a Black South African woman is Adelaide Tantsi's "Africa: My Native Land," published in 1913 in the Zulu weekly, *Ilanga Lase Natali* under her married name Adelaide Charles Dube. Dube's work, despite its historical and cultural import as a formative instance of Black women's poetry in South Africa, has been barely acknowledged in scholarly discourses. To date, the poem only appears in texts explicitly devoted to women's writing. The only anthologies it appears in—insofar as I was able to dig—are *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry* (1990) edited by Cecily Lockett and the *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* (2003) volume edited by M.J Daymond, Dorothy Driver, Sheila Meintjes, Leloba Molema, Chiedza Musengezi, Margie Orford and Nobantu Rasebotsa. It then appears in Gloria Vangile Kgalane's 1996 Master's dissertation, *Black South African Women's Poetry (1970–1991): A Critical Survey*, and in Barbara Boswell's PhD dissertation, *Black South African Women Writers: Narrating the Self, Narrating the*

[1] I use the term Black to refer to those historically classified as non-European under the apartheid regime, and I capitalise it to affirm the identity and dignity of Black people.

Nation (2010). Likewise, Nontsizi Mgqwetho, who composed powerful isiXhosa poetry in the newspaper, *Umteteleli wa Bantu*, throughout the 1920s and1930s, stands as another early voice in Black women's poetry, and her work is slowly starting to get the attention it deserves. The near-total absence and exclusion of Black women's voices in literary spaces during colonial and apartheid periods cannot be overstated. Cherry Clayton (1989: 01) observes that—prior to 1989—"of the more than 140 Black South Africans writing in English since about 1920, only seven have been women." Obviously, Clayton speaks of the work that achieved public visibility, underscoring the structural and ideological barriers that constrained Black women's writing, access to publication, recognition and archival preservation in a literary space dominated by racialised and patriarchal hierarchies.

Although the system of missionary education, spanning from the eighteenth century into the early nineteenth century, carved some pathways for Black education, it yielded but a thin harvest of literary works: "production was sparse, and sparser still by women" (Daymond et al, 2003: 30). This excessive scarcity of Black women's literary productions reveals the vast lattice of power, inequality and exclusion that ensnare Black women: "the combined patriarchy of indigenous and colonial structures, unequal access to material resources, lack of leisure time, and psychological disempowerment" (Daymond et al, 2003: 38). Clayton (1989: 02), observing the disparity between Black and white women writers in South Africa, notes that white women often had the education, leisure and financial security that smoothed their path to print and publication. For Black women, these avenues of expression were limited, made narrower by a lack of the means to venture, or even to imagine the possibility of venturing, into literary production. Missionary education was soon swept aside with the Bantu Education Act of 1953 introduced under the apartheid regime, "replacing [missionary education] with a substandard curriculum" (Fourie and Swanepoel, 2015: 05). The then prime minister, Dr H.F. Verwoerd, dismissed mission education as an affront to the apartheid vision.

The objection was that the missionary system erred in fostering 'European' ambitions in Black students (Lewis and Lemmer 2004: 69). It was "unsympathetic to the country's policy... by ignoring the segregation or 'apartheid' policy... By blindly producing pupils trained on a European model, the vain hope was created among Natives that they could occupy posts within the European community" (Lewis and Lemmer 2004: 69). As a result, the Bantu education system dismantled the imaginative and intellectual possibilities inherent in literacy (Daymond *et al*, 2003: 38). It "disempowered those having to deal with apartheid's bureaucracies, let alone those aspiring to write" (Daymond *et al*, 2003: 38). Black women, already operating at the intersection of race, class and gender oppressions, were gravely impacted. Daymond *et al* (2003: 38) further add that the language policies imposed, along with the sparse publishing opportunities, "meant that publication by black women in Southern Africa was slow and sporadic relative to that by white women and even to that by black men." This thus puts to the fore that the lack of Black women's writing is not an absence by choice but by a silence wrought by oppressive and exclusionary forces.

During the apartheid era, Black literary production was predominantly facilitated and disseminated through literary magazines. It is thus imperative to trace the speaking and visibility of Black women within these publications, the most prominent being *Drum*, *The Classic*, *New Classic,* and *Staffrider*. I choose these magazines for their significant engagement with Black writers, their substantial Black readership, and their role in catalysing what has since been characterised as the South African literary renaissance. As I shall attempt to demonstrate, this so-called renaissance privileged the contributions of (Black) male writers, thereby marginalising and obscuring the literary outputs of Black women within its historiographical framework.

Drum was established in 1951, and marked the "new African who, in opposition to apartheid, asserted a city identity" (Chapman, 2001: vii). Lewis Nkosi (cited in McDonald, 2009: 118),

one of the prominent contributors to the magazine, enunciated this, noting that *Drum* was "not so much a magazine" as a "symbol of the new African cut adrift from the tribal reserve—urbanised, eager, fast-talking and brash." The magazine became a site of both creative innovation and community for a cohort of Black writers who contributed to what is now known as the South African literary renaissance (Driver, 1996: 231). These include Lewis Nkosi, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, Alex la Guma, Richard Rive, Casey Motsitsi, Arthur Maimane, Bloke Modisane, Todd Matshikiza and Peter Clarke. It "offered quite the reverse for women," with only two Black South African women who were loosely connected to the periodical publishing books in the 1960s—Noni Jabavu and Bessie Head—and "both did so outside the country" (Driver, 1996: 231). Driver (cited in Ferreira, 2011: 67) further adds that no stories written by women appeared in *Drum* in the 1950s; those attributed to female authors were, in fact, penned by male writers using female pseudonyms. Lockett (1992: 53) confirms this was quite common and it was done for "satirical reasons, often because a female voice was open to ridicule in a way that a man's was not." Moreover, no Black women poets emerged from *Drum*. Mavis M. Kwankwa who wrote the short story "Birth of a Baby" was already a poet at the time of writing for *Drum*, having published her first poem "Maybe" in 1944 in the *Ilanga Lase Natal* newspaper. Women's roles in *Drum* were mostly limited to administrative positions such as beauty editors, typists, and clerks (Driver, 2003: 253). In text, Black women's experiences were narrated through the lens of the Black male writers of *Drum*. As Driver (1996:233) critiques, *Drum* "was part of a signifying system whereby patriarchy manfully reasserted itself in the face of its traditional rural form, but it also acknowledged women's increasing power, even as it tried to exploit and contain this power." Overall, this highlights the narrow and controlled scope of Black women's literary involvement with the spaces that defined mid-20th-century South African literature.

Another literary journal that offered the promise of amplifying Black voices in the public sphere was *The Classic*, launched in 1963 by Nat Nakasa. Nakasa envisioned the periodical as a platform for "African writing of merit" and sought to publish "the work of writers with causes to fight for, committed men and women" (Nakasa, cited in McDonald, 2009: 128). The magazine aimed to feature the voices of Africans, irrespective of their location or exile status (Brown, 2011: 48). The periodical mostly featured already established writers associated with *Drum*, with the addition of poets like Mafika Mbuli and Mbuyiseni Mtshali. There is no clear indication that the magazine ever published works by Black women. Literary archives on the journal focus primarily on the well-established male writers it featured, and the absence of Black women's contributions remains conspicuous. *The Classic* was forced to navigate the fraught terrain of censorship, avoiding banned authors while also steering clear of publishing work that could lead to the magazine's prohibition by the apartheid state (Marais, 2016: 71). This precarious balance further marginalised potential writers, particularly those who were already at the fringes of the literary establishment. In 1965, after only three issues of the periodical, Nakasa committed suicide in the United States after he was forced by the apartheid government to leave on a one-way exit permit and to abandon his editorship as he had secured a journalism fellowship at Harvard University (McDonald, 2009; Brown, 2011; Marais, 2016). In 1975, Sipho Sepamla, who became the first Black person to edit and manage a literary magazine in South Africa, resuscitated the journal under a new name, *New Classic*, with the goal of providing a platform for the younger generation to "articulate new definitions of Blackness" (McDonald, 2009: 133). Over the next three years, *New Classic* published five volumes, but only two of these included works by Black women, and even then, their representation was sporadic. The third issue, released in 1976, featured work by Fatima Dike, with two of her poems, "For a Black Woman" and "Malania," among the twelve published. The fourth issue, published in 1977, included a short

story by Bessie Head. In addition to Fatima Dike, Gloria Vangile Kgalane (1996) points to another Black woman poet, Qedusizi Buthelezi, who published a poem in *New Classic*; however, Kgalane (1996) does not specify from which issue or year the poem was published. She also uses the name Fatima Noke instead of Dike. Dike is the surname Fatima's poems are recorded under in issue no.3, so it could be possible that Kgalane and I are using different sources. The name of Qedusizi Buthelezi is also impossible to track in critical poetry anthologies. Buthelezi, as one of the earliest Black women poets, is thus clearly not given the recognition she deserves.

Out of all the African and/or Black experience-centred periodicals of the twentieth century, *Staffrider* arguably attempted to give space to the Black female voice, though to a limited extent. First launched in March 1978, under the editorship of Mike Kirkwood, *Staffrider* magazine was mostly made up of the numerous Black Consciousness-inspired community art groups, who produced what came to be known as Black consciousness poetry or Soweto poetry or New Black poetry of the 1970s. The aim of the magazine was to "encourage and give strength to a new literature based on communities" while also welcoming "writers who write and publish essentially as unattached individuals, yet find the Staffrider environment congenial" (McDonald, 2009: 144). Though the number of Black women authors who contributed to the magazine was low compared to their male counterparts or any other races who were publishing at that time, *Staffrider* could be recognised as one periodical that recorded an extensive number of Black women authors, having featured Black women writers such as Miriam Tlali, Gladys Thomas, Nise Malange, Gcina Mhlope, Ntombiyakhe kaBiyela kaXhoka, Sizakele Ndlovu, Ndaleni Radebe, Winnie Morolo, Boitumelo [Makhema or Mofokeng], Thembeka Mbobo, Alice Ntsongo, Amelia House, Noorie Cassim, Palesa Moriti, Lerato Nomvuyo Mzamane, and Maano Dzeano, among others. All these writers, with the exception of Tlali, were (also) poets. There are obviously other Black women writers

who contributed to the periodical, but it is nearly impossible to track all of them down due to a lack of cross-referencing in the literary archives. It is also difficult to track them because names do not necessarily reveal gender or race, and some women had been in the arts groups that were published in the periodical without individual names. What is more at fault are the literary archives that completely ignored women's contributions and only praised male writers, further silencing Black women's voices and preventing them from being acknowledged as contributors to the country's literary history. A good example of this is the anniversary publication of *Staffrider*, *Ten Years of Staffrider* (1988), where, out of the many poems published by Black women in the periodical, only one, Nise Malange's, is included. The other featured Black woman poet is Gladys Thomas, but she has a short story included. This omission sparked criticism from writers like Mofokeng (1989: 41), who argued that the exclusion of women from such anthologies denies them both recognition and their rightful place in the history of South African literature. Gqola (2001: 33) also noted that the *Staffrider* magazine primarily represented the Black male urban experience, thus failing to address the specific forms of exploitation Black women faced. This not only obscured the contributions of Black women to the Black Consciousness movement but also reinforced the marginalisation of their voices.

The exclusion and silencing of Black women's voices in poetry was deeply entrenched in the perception that their work was incompatible with the dominant framework of protest literature, a domain largely regarded as the purview of Black men (Gqola, 2011; Bashonga, 2015). Black women's poetry was often dismissed as addressing so-called "soft issues," a label that served to marginalise their contributions and to position poetry as primarily the terrain of men in the realm of protest literature (Bashonga, 2015: 29; Gqola, 2011: 06). Black consciousness poets or Soweto poets did not associate themselves with the European notions of poetic style or the lyric form (Chapman, 2016; Decker, 2016; d'Abdon, Byrne, Newfield,

2020). Thus, the exclusion of Black women's poetry undermines even their contribution to what has come to be known as Black poetry. Although Tlali (cited in Daymond *et al*, 2003: 24), cognizant of the intersectional limitations faced by Black women, notes that "few black women attended readings and writers' workshops in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and few were educationally, economically, politically, or culturally empowered to become writers," Mofokeng (1989: 41) posits that "many of those who wrote for *Staffrider*—both men and women—lacked previous experience of writing but they were a new breed whose work had spontaneity, truth and authenticity." Thus, the separate exclusion of women's writing both in the *Staffrider* anniversary anthology, *Ten Years of Staffrider* (1988), and the broader critical discourse surrounding Black poetry of the 1970s and 1980s represents a profoundly gendered silencing. The fact is, as it has been, that "in South Africa the poetry of all women, black and white, has been unfairly suppressed and their voices largely silenced" (Lockett, 1992: 52). This systemic suppression speaks not only to the gendered dynamics of exclusion but also to the broader inequities in how cultural and historical contributions have been archived, critiqued, and remembered. For Black women poets, this erasure reveals the struggle of confronting both racial and gendered oppression within the literary canon.

The question that might arise out of all of this is why did Black women writers not resort to other outlets for their work if literary magazines were not so inclusive? The answer is those who could, did. Magazines remained the only accessible and possible option for most (Locket, 1992; Brown, 2011), due to the severity of the apartheid censorship system. The Publications and Entertainment Act of 1963, which was later superseded by the Publications Act of 1974, introduced draconian measures against the dissemination of so-called "undesirable" material, making the publication, printing, or distribution of such works a punishable offence, with harsh fines and prison sentences (McDonald, 2009: 32–33). The 1974 Act intensified these restrictions, abolishing the right of appeal to the courts for banned

writers and publishers (Kunene, 2014: 222). Works by Black writers, especially those associated with Black consciousness, were rigorously scrutinised; submissions were intercepted by police, reviewed by security censors, and adjudicated by security committees (McDonald, 2009: 65). For Black women, already positioned at "the bottom of the scale of humanity" (Qunta cited in Kgalane, 1996: 71), the combined weight of systemic racism, sexism, and censorship created near-insurmountable barriers. Gladys Thomas and James Matthews' anthology, *Cry Rage!* (1972) marks the first volume of poetry that got banned under the Publications Act of 1963. The amended 1974 Act saw the immediate ban of Miriam Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1979), the first ever novel written by a Black woman within the borders of apartheid South Africa. Furthermore, due to the severity of the apartheid censorship system, publishers had to "contend with the government's attempts to contain, if not close down, their activities via censorship legislation and other more direct repressive means" (McDonald, 2009: 84). In addition, the Publications Act justified writers whose work could be construed as against the state to be punished through exile, imprisonment, or death (Decker, 2016: 72). Through the censorship system, the country saw annual averages of 846 bans within the years of 1969–1974 and 1222 bans within the years of 1975–1980 (McDonald, 2009: 81). Some Black women writers took the only opportunity of publishing while in exile. Christine Douts Qunta, for example, published her poetry collections *Hoyi na! Azania: Poems of an African struggle* (1979) and *Heroes & other Treasures* (1990) in exile. Lindiwe Mabuza co-authored the anthology of poems by ANC women in exile, *Malibongwe! ANC Women: Poetry Is Their Weapon* (1978). Lauretta Ngcobo, having published *Cross of Gold* in 1981 and her acclaimed novel, *And They Didn't Die,* in 1990, is one of the Black women novelists who published their works in exile.

Three decades after the end of apartheid, where does Black women's poetry stand? Black women's poetry has profoundly burgeoned. It has established a robust corpus that reclaims

and redefines poetic creation as a medium for epistemological innovation. Makhosazana Xaba, in her excellent surveying of Black women's poetry publications from 2000 to 2018, *Our Words, Our Worlds: Writing on Black South African Women Poets, 2000–2018* (2018), for example, records eighty-four poetry anthologies published within the space of only eighteen years. These make up the highest number of Black women's poetry anthologies produced within a space of eighteen years in all of South Africa's history. These collections represent both a quantitative expansion and a qualitative reconfiguration of what constitutes the literary imagination in post-apartheid South Africa. The expansive number of anthologies published also speaks to the growing number of publishing houses, most of which are founded by Black women. These include Impepho Press, which two of the texts under study, namely vangile gantsho's *red cotton* (2018) and danai mupotsa's *feeling and ugly* (2018), are published under; African Perspectives Publishing; PeoPress/JahRose Productions; Nsuku Publishing Consultancy; and Diana Ferrus Publishers, among others. These presses function as counter-hegemonic institutions that challenge the exclusions perpetuated by mainstream publishing. In their works, Black women poets "articulate their demand for experiences of empowering changes in the post-apartheid historical moment and their resistance to oppressive continuities of the apartheid era" (Maqagi cited in Xaba 2018: 63). They unsettle traditional hierarchies of South African literature and demand a re-evaluation of what—and whose—voices matter. In the words of Xaba (2018: 15), they are "disruptions to what was." Molebatsi's assertion (cited in Chidi, Zondi and Mkhize, 2024: 85) that documenting women's poetry "is crucial so we don't forget the value of women's truths and cultural productions" amplifies the urgency of my work here: to magnify Black women's speaking and visibility in poetry through an analysis of the three selected texts, Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* (2018), vangile gantsho's *red cotton* (2018) and danai mupotsa's *feeling and ugly* (2018).

Theoretical Frameworks

1.3 Resistance and resilience: a symbiosis

This study acknowledges the intrinsic connection between resistance and resilience, so as to dissect the multifaceted strategies that the Black women poets under study employ to confront structures of power. Lorde (1985: 126) notes that, for women, “poetry forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.” Similarly, Baderoon (cited in Xaba, 2018: 08) asserts that poetic language “acts as a mode of maximum truth-telling and poets bend language into multiple registers that achieve the nearly impossible.” Likewise, the three Black women poets studied in this thesis wield language to reconstruct their realities and tell their truths, subsequently subverting the systems that dictate Black women’s existence and contorting the public space to recognise their voices. This study, therefore, seeks to uncover the resistant and resilient strategies employed by Black women in the texts under study, as they navigate and challenge systems of power. Gordon (2017: 35) observes that “there is currently much literature on how women resist and are resilient to violence, but not many studies that link these two.” This study links the two concepts and reframes them as symbiotic forces that make liberation possible. The study recognises resistance as a way to challenge systems of power, while resilience represents the sources of strength harnessed by Black women as they refuse to conform to oppressive systems. The interplay between resistance and resilience is symbiotic: resistance stirs resilience, resilience fortifies resistance. Resistance stands as the rallying cry, the charge into the fray; resilience answers as the steadfast sentinel, ensuring endurance in the struggle. They are never opposing, never hierarchical, but forever entwined. I should caution, however, before I proceed, that my reading of resistance and resilience as symbiotic forces necessary

for liberation does not overlook the fact that structural conditions need to change, as we can only be resistant and resilient to a point before breaking if the structures do not shift.

The concepts of resistance and resilience have been rigorously interrogated across a wide range of disciplines, including historical studies, political studies, cultural studies, critical race studies, literature studies, environmental studies, each exploring the nuances of these concepts in relation to different social, political and cultural contexts. The study distils the various conceptualisations of resistance and resilience to reframe them within the contexts of Black women's speaking and visibility. Foucault and Abu-Lughod offer a good angle through which to comprehend resistance in the context of Black women's speaking and visibility: Foucault (1978: 95) argues that "where there is power, there is resistance", and Abu-Lughod (1990: 42) maintains that "where there is resistance, there is power." Resistance ensues when the marginalised subject discovers the hegemonic paradigm and, through their praxis and liberation agenda, challenges normative expectations and constructs counter-hegemonic narratives (Fanon, 1963; Lorde, 1985; hooks, 1984; Collins, 2000). Consequently, resistance manifests in intricate and varied ways to assert its presence. Collins (2000: 203) reinforces this notion: "if power as domination is organized and operates via intersecting oppressions, then resistance must show comparable complexity." This encapsulates the aim of this study, which is to unravel the intersectional resistance (and resilience) strategies employed by Black women to confront power structures, as depicted in the three collections. Within the praxis of Black women's speaking and visibility, hooks (1989: 08) avers that Black women's speaking emerges as not only an "expression of creative power" but also as "an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless." In addition, Xaba (2018: 16) argues that books are part of visibility politics, and so to write, as Perlow (2018: 102) argues, "represents a powerful political act of resistance to those that seek to control and/or silence Black women." In essence, Black women's writing—

their speaking and visibility—in the post-transitional period emerges as a potent form of resistance directed at the power structures that have long worked to stifle their voices.

Resilience is defined in multiple ways in scholarly discourses. Walsh (2015: 04) describes it as “the capacity to rebound from adversity, strengthened and more resourceful,” while Theron (2016: 636) speaks of it as “the process of adjusting well to significant adversity.” Jefferis and Theron (2018: 02) expand on this, framing resilience as “positive adaptation” in the face of “devastating odds,” and Goodkind *et al*. (2020: 318) define it as a “positive outcome” amidst hardship. These definitions offer useful entry points to make sense of the conceptualisation of resilience in the study. Resilience in the study is not viewed as a mere outcome, nor as an inherent capability or adaptability; instead, it is seen as the vital current—the energy—through which these processes flow. In other words, it is that energy which sustains resistance and is enacted through the act of resistance. This makes resilience not a static achievement but a living, breathing energy, propelling the ongoing struggle for transformation. Feminist scholars such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Gabeba Baderoon, Barbara Boswell and Sisi Maqagi, among others, have explored resilience strategies that Black women employ by highlighting the ways that Black women harness sources of strength to dismantle systemic barriers. In the context of Black women’s poetry and Black feminist criticism, resilience materialises through the dismantling of power structures, the embrace of the erotic, the sustenance of solidarity or sisterhood, and the adoration of the Black female body, as well as the reclamation of narratives and the rewriting of history (Lorde, 1978; hooks, 1984; Collins, 2000; Baderoon, 2011; Boswell, 2016). These spaces create for Black women “a wholeness that has been stolen by Eurocentric history, and denied by oppressive ideologies” (Boswell, 2016: 24).

1.4 Intersectionality

This study primarily uses the theory of intersectionality advanced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) as a guiding tool to examine the intersecting oppressions faced by Black women in the three collections under study. Intersectionality serves as both a heuristic and analytic tool through which the intersecting strategies of resistance and resilience enacted by the Black women in the texts under study can be ascertained. The theoretical lineage of intersectionality is rooted in the intellectual and activist traditions of nineteenth-century Black feminists in the United States such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary Church Terell, who illuminated the simultaneity of race, gender and class long before the term itself was articulated (May, 2015: 56). It fully gained traction through Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989). Crenshaw (1989) posited the concept of intersectionality to contend that conventional feminist and anti-racist approaches do not address the interplay of the multiple oppressions faced by Black women. Intersectionality recognises and emphasises the need to address interlocking systems of power and challenges traditional approaches to understanding social inequality by advocating for the inclusion and amplification of marginalised voices and perspectives that were historically silenced or overlooked (Romero, 2018; Collins, 2019). In and of itself, intersectionality "represents an implicit critique of exclusion and erasure of difference" (Kelly *et al*, 2021: 02). As Nash (2018: 24) explains it, "it is an antisubordination project, one committed to foregrounding exclusion and its effects." Accordingly, the theory of intersectionality functions to destabilise monolithic understandings of power, insisting on the recognition of complex positionalities operating across "micro (individual) and macro (sociostructural) levels" (Atewologun, 2018: 02). It is a critical framework that engages in "uncovering and identifying processes of differentiation and systems of domination that set marginalized groups apart from dominant groups" (Al-Faham, Davis, Ernst, 2019: 253). In

the context of Black women's speaking and visibility, intersectionality provides a framework through which to dissect how Black women at the intersection of racism, white heteropatriarchy, patriarchy, and the hegemony of heteronormativity in the case of Black queer women, negotiate their lives, navigate their intersectional realities and forge escape from their intersecting oppressions.

Crenshaw's articulation of intersectionality encompasses three interrelated dimensions: structural intersectionality, political intersectionality and representational intersectionality. Structural intersectionality examines how the intersection of race and gender shapes Black women's experiences "of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different than that of white women" (Crenshaw, 1991: 1245). It is integral to the study as it provides a lens through which to examine how the three Black women poets under study articulate resistance to patriarchy and its acts of violence, including but not limited to rape. Political intersectionality, on the other hand, foregrounds the ways feminist and antiracist politics have (in)advertently marginalised issues of violence specific to Black women (Crenshaw, 1991: 1245). This dimension is pertinent to the study as it highlights how Black women's experiences often remain unaddressed in these movements: white women in feminist spaces may fail to grasp the impact of racial oppression, and Black men in antiracist movements may overlook the compounded effects of gender-based violence. Representational intersectionality then reveals how "controversies over the representation of women of color in popular culture can also elide the particular location of women of color, and thus become yet another source of intersectional disempowerment" (Crenshaw, 1991: 1245). This aspect is significant to the study as I focus on Black women's speaking and visibility, that is, Black women's acts of self-representation, rather than on how these representations are mediated by external cultural discourse. The study situates Black women as epistemic agents, or what Gouws (2017: 19)

describes as "knowers and producers of knowledge," necessitating and fostering "the creation of counter-hegemonic knowledge."

1.5 Fugitivity, fugitive speaking, feminist fugitive listening

To eloquently unveil how Black women navigate and escape power structures, as portrayed in the three texts under study, I am attentive to Fred Moten's (2003) concept of fugitivity. While this concept emerges from within the United States and diasporic contexts, this study posits the merits of its application within the context of South Africa as well. Moten (2018: 131) situates fugitivity as "a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed," an incessant refusal that cultivates the possibility of existing in the otherwise. It is an escape-bound desire "for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always already improper voice or instrument" (Moten, 2018: 131). Rooted in the insurgent poetics of escapology, fugitivity aligns with what Christina Sharpe (2016) describes as "wake work," which makes visible "the modes of attending to Black life and Black suffering" (Sharpe, 2016: 22). Fugitivity rests on a radical refusal: a refusal of domination, a refusal to be spoken over and for, a refusal of the terms that sustain structural subjugation. Audra Simpson (2016: 330) frames this "as the revenge of consent," which disavows the legitimations of the ongoing operations of systems of oppression. In the context of Black women's speaking and visibility, fugitivity helps elucidate how the three Black women poets, Koleka Putuma, vangile gantsho and danai mupotsa, articulate a collective refusal—not only of their own silencing and erasure but also of the obliteration of Black women's subjectivity more broadly. Fugitivity provides a framework through which to foreground their voices "as instantiations of a radically different political imaginary that steers clear of reducing the subjectivity of the oppressed to bare life" (Weheliye, 2014: 126). Central to the three poets' fugitive refusal is their reclamation of Black narratives and the Black female body from the inscriptions of the white gaze, patriarchy and homophobia. For example, Putuma in her poem

“Black Joy” speaks of Black joy in ways that resist the constrictive colonial narratives that confine Black childhood and/or life to suffering and absence. gantsho in her poem, “My Girlfriend Hates Penetration,” dismantles the voyeuristic, prurient fixations generated by patriarchal and homophobic structures that surveil queer intimacies. mupotsa in her haiku poem, “I Won’t Take a Lover,” animates the Black female body as an agentic, expressive and feeling entity, consequently subverting colonial narratives that seek and have sought to circumscribe and silence it. In their speaking, each poet enacts a poetics of resistance that is both personal and collective, singular and multitudinous.

Speaking necessitates listening. For this reason, I incorporate Andrew Brooks’ (2020) concept of fugitive listening alongside Helene Strauss’ (2022) framework of resonant feminist listening. Fugitive listening, as Brooks (2020: 13) posits, attunes itself to those “voices that have previously been dismissed as noise,” reclaiming the subterranean, “the undercommons,” in the terminology of Harney and Moten (2013), the “meticulously subordinated cogs,” in the words of Foucault (cited in Boswell, 2017: 01), those who occupy the “bottom of the scale of humanity,” to go back to Qunta (cited in Kgalane, 1996: 71). Strauss’ (2022: 22) notion of resonant feminist listening amplifies this by insisting on a critical attunement to “the repeated historical censoring, disciplining, and erasure of feminist feeling in South Africa” and the imperative to resurface these feelings in service of feminist ends. This dual praxis—fugitive and resonant feminist listening—underpins the overarching objective of this thesis: to attend to, amplify, and theorise the systemically annulled and nullified “feminist feeling,” to return to Strauss (2022: 22), in Black women’s poetry.

1.6 The eros, the erotic and sticky affects

Boswell (2018: 87) aptly observes that “one of the trends that characterise the growing body of sexuality poetry by Black women is the celebration of female bodies, sex and women’s genitalia.” This trend, which asserts and reclaims Black female subjectivity, runs deeply

through the anthologies under study. As I have been noting, the three Black women poets, Putuma, gantsho and mupotsa, consistently resist and unsettle the white gaze, white heteropatriarchy, patriarchy and the hegemony of heteronormativity, by using sexuality and the erotic as generative sites for the "expression of their sense of wholeness" (Maqagi, 2018: 65). Morgan (2015: 36) judges that "we've become feminist fluent in theorizing the many ways in which our sexuality has been compromised"; however, we have delayed in "moving past that damage to claim pleasure and a healthy erotic as fundamental rights." Similarly, maree brown (2019: 09) supports the act of celebrating Black female erotics, noting that "we must prioritize the pleasure of those most impacted by oppression." I attempt to follow this principle in the thesis, particularly in chapter 4, in my engagement with mupotsa's anthology, *feeling and ugly* (2018), where I extend my conceptual frameworks to include Jovan Lewis' (2023) framework of fugitive repair, Audre Lorde's (1984) notion of the erotic and Sara Ahmed's (2014) concept of sticky affects to thoroughly engage with the feeling Black female body that pervades the text.

Lewis (2023: 1396) theorises fugitive repair as a mode of existence that refuses the imposed wounds of colonial and racial structures, while simultaneously imagining new forms of freedom and self-determination. In this framework, repair is not mere restitution but an insurgent practice of making one's relationship to the self and the world. The erotic, as explained by Lorde (1984:53), is a "measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings." Firmly anchored in a "female and spiritual plane," the "erotic provides the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person" (Lorde, 1984: 53-56). Ahmed's (2014) notion of "sticky" affect names the relational stickiness of objects towards other objects functioning within a framework of intersubjectivity. She explains it as "a relation of 'doing' in which there is not a distinction between passive or active, even though the stickiness of one object might come before the

stickiness of the other, such that the other seems to cling to it" (Ahmed, 2014: 91). These frameworks offer a lens through which to understand and acknowledge the Black female body's desires, somaticised affect and vulnerabilities. They bring into dialogue the ways in which the feeling Black female body negotiates its being in the world.

1.7 Research objectives and questions

The central objective of this study is to attend to, engage with and magnify the Black female voice present in the three texts under study. The aim of this study is to examine the intersectional realities of Black women depicted in the three collections. It aims to explore the ways in which the three collections show how Black women navigate and resist systems of power. The study is informed by the following key questions:

I. How do the three Black women poets under study assert their voices and establish their visibility within a literary canon that has historically devalued, limited and excluded the contributions of Black women?

II. How do the Black women in the three collections articulate resistance and resilience to challenge power structures, navigate intersections of identity, and reshape societal assumptions?

III. What new possibilities and perspectives does the resurgence of Black women's poetry offer to Black life and the Black female body? And how are these poets disrupting societal norms and imagining new ways of living?

1.8 Research methodology and design

This study employs a qualitative, critical textual analytical approach within a desktop research framework. The analysis employs various approaches to literary interpretation, including textual analysis, thematic exploration, and socio-cultural contextualisation, to

foreground the intersectional realities of Black women, their modes of resistance and resilience, and their assertions of agency, as depicted in the collections under study.

Chapter Outline

From here, the study will proceed as follows. In Chapter 2, "Fugitive (re)imaginings of being Black, woman, and queer in Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* (2017)," I examine how Putuma subverts white imagination, along with its colonial underpinnings, which have shaped and dominated Black experiences subsequent to colonial conquest. Moreover, I look at the intersecting forms of oppression that affect Black women, with a stretched focus on the ways in which hetero-patriarchal influences, gender-subjugations, and violence, intersect and manifest. I then examine how Black queer women are also ensnared within this web of subjugation.

In chapter 3, "Black feminist fugitive Spill: waves of escape, fight, and flight in vangile gantsho's *red cotton* (2018)," I read gantsho's *red cotton* as a spillage consisting of waves of expression propelled to the shore, the reader. This is where Brooks' (2020) concept of fugitive listening and Strauss' (2022) ethos of resonant feminist listening come in handy to underscore fugitive feminist manifestations and manoeuvres embedded in the text. I further scrutinise how Black women and Black queer women, as depicted in the text, navigate the interlocking systems of power, with particular attention to the pernicious forces of patriarchal violence, the pervasive white gaze, and the hegemony of heteronormativity. A palpable leitmotif of escape emerges from gantsho's collection, underpinned by an imagining of the dialectics of fight and flight[2] as tools to navigate oppressive structures.

In chapter 4, "On feeling: Black feminist eropoetics of love and loss in mupotsa's *feeling and ugly* (2018)," I read mupotsa's work as an eropoetics—a term I use to underscore how her

[2] I appropriate these terms from clinical trauma studies, and I use them as broader metaphors in the study (see, for instance, Sakemoto and Tanaka, 2024; Raffa, Fink, Triphati, 2024).

poetics are squarely intertwined with the erotic—that animates the Black female body as a feeling entity, alive with desires, yearning and pain. To excavate this, I approach mupotas's eropoetics using Lorde's (1984) concept of the erotic and Ahmed's (2014) sticky affects, with Lewis' (2023) framework of fugitive repair as a guiding analytic tool. My reading of mupotsa's eropoetics rests on the notion that the affective registers—the sticky, erotic energies that pervade the anthology—empower, shape and unsettle the feeling Black female body as it navigates through the complexities of love and loss.

In chapter 5, I conclude the study. I provide a synthesis of the findings and explain the contributions that this study seeks to make. I also discuss the limitations of the study and offer recommendations that may benefit future research.

Chapter 2: Fugitive (re)imaginings of being Black, woman and queer in Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* (2017)

> I can only insist persistently that these fugitive musings on the Blackness of it all, the Black feminism of it all, the queerness of it all, are in the interest of saying things that have long been said but saying them differently, in hopes that some of y'all might get on board with this stuff that's been circulating for a while now in clandestine enclaves and subterranean juke joints.
>
> –Marquis Bey, *Them Goon Rules: Fugitive Essays on Radical Black Feminism* (2018)

Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* (2017) traverses the interstices of Black social living: what it means to be Black, to be a Black woman and to be a Black queer woman in post-transitional South Africa. In her collection, Putuma navigates the intricacies of South African history and its contemporary affairs—what she categorically unpacks as "inherited memory," "buried memory" and "post-memory"—to contest dominant narratives and prevailing social paradigms, confront power structures, and resist categorisation and reductive labels. Her writing is imbued with an exploration of the injustices, racism and violence that continue to plague South Africa. In engaging with these issues, Putuma's collection powerfully embodies resistance and resilience strategies.

Throughout this study, I view resistance as a way to challenge systems of power, while resilience represents the sources of strength harnessed by marginalised groups as they refuse to conform to oppressive systems. Resistance ensues when the marginalised subjects discover the hegemonic paradigm and, through their praxis and liberation agenda, challenge normative expectations and construct counter-hegemonic narratives (Fanon, 1962; hooks, 1984; Lorde,

1985; Collins, 2000). Resilience, on the other hand, as argued by Black feminist critics, materialises through the embrace of the erotic, the sustenance of solidarity or sisterhood, and the adoration of the Black female body, as well as the reclamation of narratives and the rewriting of history (Lorde, 1978; hooks, 1984; Collins, 2000; Baderoon, 2011; Boswell, 2016).

I observe a symbiotic relationship between the strategies of resistance and resilience embedded in Putuma's collection. The strategies of resistance nourish and fortify strategies of resilience, and the strategies of resilience, in turn, ignite and nurture strategies of resistance. To unfurl the threads of this idea, I demonstrate how resistance manifests through subversive mechanisms that serve to weaken hegemonic control, and resilience emerges as a response to the need for tenacity in the ongoing struggle for social justice. Where resistance represents the proactive agency enacted, resilience functions as a sustaining impetus thereof—the very resistance sustained, in turn, nourishes resilience; the very resilience nourished, in turn, serves as the fertile soil from which resistance blooms. In the symphony of logic, then, we can deduce that resistance draws from the well of resilience, just as resilience drinks from the well of resistance. Putuma's poetry collection, thus, manifests as a dynamic site where strategies of resistance and resilience converge, interact, and mutually reinforce each other. To best unearth the intricate contours of resistance and resilience present in Putuma's collection, I employ the concept of intersectionality by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) as a foundational framework and supplement it with Fred Moten's (2003) concept of fugitivity.

Crenshaw (1989) posits the concept of intersectionality to contend that conventional feminist and anti-racist approaches do not address the interlocking systems of power that continue to dominate marginalised groups, thus necessitating an intersectional perspective. The theory serves to highlight the complexity of power dynamics, revealing the ways in which power structures such as racism, sexism, and homophobia intersect and reinforce one another. May

(2015: 21) clarifies that it highlights “how lived identities, structural systems, sites of marginalisation, forms of power, and modes of resistance intersect in dynamic, shifting ways.” Similarly, Collins (2019: 02) underscores that “it bundles together ideas from disparate places, times, and perspectives, enabling people to share points of view that formerly were forbidden, outlawed, or simply obscured.” Put succinctly, intersectionality challenges traditional approaches to understanding social inequality by advocating for the acknowledgement and amplification of marginalised voices and perspectives that were historically silenced or overlooked, and explaining how different forms of resistance intersect.

To best address the power dynamics that affect marginalised groups, as Gouws (2017: 23) affirms, “it is necessary to show the interlocking nature of different types of oppression in the experience of individuals.” In the context of South Africa (and its history), the racial hierarchy implemented under the apartheid regime privileged white people to occupy the upper echelons of power, with Coloureds and Indians in between, and Black people occupying the lower rungs of the social hierarchy: this means Black women were far below, beneath even Black men, insofar as the intersection of race, power, and gender is concerned (see Gouws, 2017; Pirtle, 2022).

My application of the theory of intersectionality, therefore, navigates the intersections of power dynamics against Black people, particularly Black women and Black queer women[3]. I first trace the structural factors and influences that affect Black people in general. I then examine the systemic power hierarchies that pertain to Black women, taking into account the compounding factors related to the perpetuation of these structures by Black men that

[3] This study does not seek to measure suffering on a scale between Black women and Black queer women. Rather, it turns to intersectionality as a lens through which to witness how Black women navigate both racism and sexism, while Black queer women also contend with homophobia and heteronormativity.

reinforce the marginal status of Black women. Finally, I examine how these power dynamics manifest in the context of Black queer woman. In essence, the theory of intersectionality functions to elucidate how Putuma's work encapsulates the ontological underpinnings of Black existence, revealing the nuances of Blackness, Black womanhood, and Black queerness in post-transitional South Africa. I concurrently engage with Moten's (2003) concept of fugitivity to unravel the multifaceted avenues through which Black people, Black women, and Black queer women are shown to navigate and negotiate their identities and experiences in a society marked by varying degrees of acceptance and prejudice.

Fred Moten (2018: 131) explains fugitivity as a "desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed." It is a deliberate departure from the proposed ways of being, an act of escape, and a detachment from conformity (Harney and Moten, 2013; Kelley, 2021). It is a "being in motion that has learned that organisations are obstacles to organising ourselves and that there are spaces and modalities that exist separate from the […] housed and positioned" (Harney and Moten, 2013: 11). Fugitivity allows for the creation of an alternative world by subjecting prevailing narratives to radical and transformative scrutiny (see Moten, 2018: 206). Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* (2017) embodies this phenomenon as it engages in a radical re-evaluation of societal constructs, thus facilitating the emergence of alternative imaginative horizons. I use the concept of fugitivity to unravel escape manoeuvres from the clutches of hegemony that make possible alternative perspectives and realities, as depicted in Putuma's collection. The concept of fugitivity helps unveil the extensive dimensions of counter-narrative and subversion that permeate Putuma's work. It demonstrates how Putuma envisions and asserts resistance and resilience in her depiction of Black, woman, and queer experiences. It reveals Putuma's sense of subversion in spaces such as politics and religion, and how this subversion engenders fugitive forms of sociality.

In this chapter, I map the nuances of Putuma's subversion of the intersecting power structures that affect Black people, particularly Black women, and Black queer women, as manifests within her collection. I am interested in the ways in which her collection materialises as a poetry of refusal, of dismantling, of discharging, and of freeing. I am engaged with the sinews of her verses—the ways in which she confronts power structures, disrupts the status quo, escapes normative confines, carves out spaces for alternative forms of living, and conjures up futures yet uncharted. I am similarly attuned to her use of language: I explore her stylistic choices and tonal nuances and the candour of her diction.

2.1 Reclaiming and redefining Black experiences

Putuma's approach to depicting the experiences of Black people within her anthology is marked by a commitment to challenging the oversimplification of these experiences, as the history of colonialism and/or apartheid has "constructed what 'Blackness' is for the white imagination" (Raughley, 2021: para. 5). Putuma challenges colonial narratives in their attempt to constrict and homogenise the spectrum of Black experience into a prescribed set of circumstances. This illuminates Lorde's (1985: 126) contention that, for women, "poetry forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action." Building on this perspective, Baderoon (in Xaba, 2018: 06) asserts that poetry is the place in which Black women "[refuse] the narrow scripts prescribed by discourses of racism, respectability and cultural authenticity." Raughley (2021: para 8), concurring with these viewpoints, adds that Black writers challenge white people's perceptions of Black pain by "writing the reality of pain with the kind of nuance that creates space for catharsis, transformation and even healing." In a parallel vein, Putuma's portrayal of Black experiences emancipates them from the confines of the white gaze, thereby fostering a sense of transformation, catharsis, and even healing outside of white imaginations. Her work

transcends mere advocacy for the inclusion of marginalised voices; instead, it confronts and disrupts the very systems that perpetually marginalise these individuals.

In the poem "Black Joy" Putuma resists the constrictive narratives that portray Black childhood solely through the prism of suffering or absence of joy. The poem manifests as a counter-narrative to the structures that confine Black life within the margins of normative, often reductive, narratives. Feldman (2021: 10) maintains that "only when a Black being recognizes their oppression, victimization, or commodification by speaking, talking back, or refusing to be named and delimited does fugitivity become a lived reality." Feldman's argument, in its basic sense, reveals that fugitivity becomes possible only when the marginalised subject refuses the constraints imposed upon them by unequal power structures. Likewise, Putuma's resistance in the poem emerges as a refusal to be named or circumscribed—it is an un-naming act that consequently engenders alternative modes of identification, a process of self-naming—an insistence on the redefinition and reclamation of Black childhood outside of predefined categories. Such resistance opens up avenues of autonomy that challenge the static nature of conventional narratives influenced by the white gaze. Through this undertaking, Putuma prompts us to "recognise the many ways that Black people live, be, and occupy space" (Duncan, Dunn, and Hall, 2023: 244). The speaker narrates:

> My grandmother's mattress
>
> knew each of my
>
> siblings,
>
> cousins,
>
> and the neighbour's children's
>
> morning breath

by name.

A single mattress spread on the floor was enough for all of us. (Putuma, 2017: 15)

Here, we observe an intimate familial and communal togetherness, wherein the grandmother's house extends beyond accommodating her immediate grandchildren to include the neighbour's children. Putuma's depiction of this communal unity is emblematic of a deep-seated communalism, rooted in the African tradition and the philosophy of "ubuntu," where the boundaries between kinship blur, and shared humanity and collective well-being take precedence (see, for instance, Patel, Mohammed, and Koen, 2024). The personification of the mattress, knowing all the children's breaths by their names, in the onomastic sense of names, suggests an awareness of each child's presence and identity. This intimate knowledge signifies a deep connection between the mattress and each child, highlighting the sustenance of this togetherness. This cleverly contrasts with the naming and/or knowing imposed by white people on Black childhood that Putuma confronts—one founded solely upon colonial perspectives. This differs from the mattress' knowledge, which is rooted in authentic interactions with the children.

The humble placement of the mattress on the floor, accommodating all children, signifies a sense of contentment and collective joy that radiates through this shared space. The mattress without a bed frame also indicates poverty, but that sense of lack is subsumed by the collective joy of the children who bed on it. Putuma reveals to us in the poem "Hand-me-Downs" that this collective unity extends not only to sharing spaces but also to sharing food. The speaker says: "the neighbour's sugar was an open jar without a debt collector" (Putuma, 2017: 18). This act of sharing food without any expectation of reciprocation resonates strongly with the principles of "ubuntu." The metaphor of the "open jar" epitomises the ease of access to food among the neighbours, mirroring the communal spirit ingrained in African

ways of life. This simultaneously aligns with Duncan, Dunn, and Hall's (2023: 244) assertion that "Black joy in fugitive space is both communal and embodied," as it reveals the neighbourly bonds and embodied experiences that shape this collective Black joy—it is the kind of Black joy that functions as a fugitive response to hardship and scarcity.

There is a notable portrayal of sustenance or satiety of food experienced by the speaker in the poem "Black Joy." This portrayal of satisfaction, as we shall see, transcends the corporeal fulfilment of consuming food, and reveals the joy that accompanies this experience. The speaker narrates:

> Bread slices were buttered with iRama
>
> and rolled into sausage shapes;
>
> we had it with Black rooibos, we did not ask for cheese.
>
> We were filled.
>
> My cousins and I would gather around one large bowl of
>
> umngqusho,
>
> each with their own spoon.
>
> Sugar water completed the meal.
>
> We were home and whole. (Putuma, 2017: 15)

The act of spreading iRama, a term which refers to margarine, on bread, and rolling the bread into a sausage-like shape and savouring it with black Rooibos tea reveals the unassuming yet

gratifying essence of this meal. The placement of the prefix “i” in the term “Rama,” making it iRama, alludes to the cultural depth of this experience, as such phrasing is mostly prevalent among Nguni people in South Africa. This linguistic nuance not only imparts an air of cultural connection but also reveals the speaker’s emotional resonance with this culinary tradition. Additionally, the notion of not asking for cheese, as revealed in line 3, signifies not a mere personal preference but a state of contentment with what they have, as the speaker reveals in the monostich stanza: “we were filled” (Putuma, 2017: 15).

The last stanza of the quotation above, albeit traversing a thematic terrain similar to the preceding stanzas, places emphasis on the familial aspect of food-sharing. The speaker and her cousins gathering around a “large bowl of umngqusho,” a Xhosa traditional dish made of samp and beans, with each holding their own spoon, also vividly captures the essence of sharing inherent in African culture. Putuma’s use of the term “umngqusho,” like her use of the term “iRama,” denotes an underlying ethos of cultural connection and celebration of cultural identity. This also works to assert the importance of Black South African experiences in literary spaces. Additionally, the idea of each child holding their own spoon signifies the (meant-to-be) equitable nature of this food-sharing, and the act of culminating the repast with sugar water underscores the overall sense of fulfilment among the family members. This vivid imagery reveals the sensory and emotional dimensions that saturate this scene, portraying a sense of belonging and harmony among the cousins, as the speaker affirms that they were “home and whole” (Putuma, 2017: 15). Putuma’s portrayal of the joyful aspects of Black childhood here manifests as what Johnson (2016: 180) would regard as a political manoeuvre to “‘make do’ and use the in/visibility and in/audibility of black joy as a site with which to operate outside of white supremacy,” as it embraces Black childhood outside of the white gaze. Immediately hereafter, Putuma throws a keenly trenchant question at her readers, probing,

[b]ut

Isn’t it funny?

That when they ask about black childhood,

All they are interested in is our pain,

As if the joy parts were accidental. (Putuma, 2017: 16)

Putuma’s question here poignantly instigates a sense of introspection for the reader, irrespective of whether the reader belongs to the “they” category, denoting non-Black people, or the “us” cohort, representing the speaker’s collective—both groups are prompted to recognise the constrictive framings of Black childhood. Lines 3–4 of the stanza signify a form of epistemic erasure, wherein the joyful aspects of Black childhood are subsumed by an exclusive focus on Black children’s suffering. The poem, on the whole, acts as a counter-narrative to the pain-centric narratives that surround Black life.

Putuma expands the thematic terrain she traverses in the poem “Black Joy” in her poem “Water” to challenge the white gaze cast upon Black people in their interaction with water or the ocean—the poem manifests as a subversive force against colonial influences and structures that seek to regulate and control Black life. The speaker narrates:

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 surfboards, 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 termed fear. (Putuma, 2017: 99)

The line, “they mock us,” immediately establishes the adversarial tone that permeates the poem, where “us” refers to the speaker’s collective, comprising Black people, and “they” alludes to the yet-to-be-disclosed subjects, subsequently revealed as white people. This polemical tension is also revealed by the speaker’s engagement with her collective, represented by “us,” before confronting the as-of-yet-unidentified group, represented by “they,” as shown in lines 1–3: it is as though the realisation of this “mock[ing]” serves as an impetus that fuels the subsequent confrontation. The concurrent use of the first-person pronouns “ourselves,” “we,” and the first-person plural possessive determiner “our” adds to the collective ethos present in the poem, emblematic of the collective solidarity we find in “Black joy.” On the other hand, the second-person pronouns “you” and “your” contrast with the collective and serve as the linchpin[s] of the poem’s subsequent confrontational register.

The speaker’s direct confrontation with white people breaks off in lines 4–11, where she judges white people’s interaction with the sea as being primarily for recreational and leisure activities; this is in stark contrast with Black people’s, as emphasised by “for you” in contrast with “but we,” which primarily revolves around religious and traditional practices. In doing so, Putuma highlights the different traditions and cultural practices of the two groups as well as their associated value systems; however, the former group, that is white people, as their

colonial privileges afford them, occupy the position of subjecting the latter group, which is Black people, to mockery and harmful stereotypes. Putuma reveals this in the first stanza of the poem, where the speaker discloses that she often hears the "joke about Black people not being able to swim, / or being scared of water" (Putuma, 2017: 98). She further expresses that "we are mocked / […] / for wiping our faces the way that we do when coming out of the water" (Putuma, 2017: 98). It is no surprise then that the speaker issues a pointed rejoinder in line 12 of the quoted stanza, contending, "our respect for water is what you termed fear" (Putuma, 2017: 99). In light of this analysis, readers may be justified in concluding that the speaker's endurance of the mockery of her and her collective's interaction with water becomes a foundation upon which the need for resistance is constructed. The cultivated resistance, in turn, strengthens the speaker's agency and self-efficacy. In like manner, the strengthened agency fortifies the ongoing resistance.

In my engagement with the poem "Water," I am brought to reflect on what Musila (2017: 693) terms "epistemic disarticulation," which she explains as a "mismatch of assumptions and ideas" that is "less about ignorance" and more about the "inability to acknowledge multiple modes of knowing." In the poem, this epistemic disarticulation becomes evident in the distorted perceptions and stereotypes imposed on Black people's interaction with water. The mockery that Putuma is challenging arises from a fundamental failure by white people to acknowledge and attribute value to other forms of living and/or knowledge systems other than their own. In a similar vein, Chakrabarthy (1992 cited in Musila, 2017: 694) highlights that Europeans have made the world "knowable only through those categories of knowledge developed in Europe," thereby making the world "exist only in and through those categories of European modernity." Putuma's resistance in the poem, therefore, is a fugitive endeavour aimed at refusing to be delimited or fixed by white imaginations. She pushes against the

colonial gaze and narratives imposed upon Black experiences and subsequently redefines and reclaims the significance of the ocean for Black people.

2.2 Black women speaking: what can unsilence un/do?

Putuma's collection, in the context of magnifying Black women's voices, as her poem "Teachings" elucidates, manifests as "a weapon used to exorcise a lineage of silence;" "a medicine used to heal years of silence;" "a doctrine used to deliver one from the ills of silencing;" and "a middle finger to the erasure and silencing of womxn like [her]" (Putuma, 2017:81). This aligns with Baderoon's (2018 cited in Xaba, 2018: 09) assertion that "to refuse complicity, feminist writing challenges the invisibility and deadly familiarity of Black women's pain. It contests the power of violent rhetoric by reclaiming and redirecting language in new ways." Likewise, Putuma's work serves as a catalyst in dismantling the entrenched hierarchies of influence—that is, the deeply rooted systems of power that dictate whose voices and experiences are prioritised. In consequence, Putuma is amplifying the agency and visibility of Black women. For example, in her poem, "Interview," Putuma contends, "Black men and white womxn / always write about black womxn / as if we are already dead" (Putuma, 2017: 78). Her work, therefore, serves as a clarion call to combat the silencing and erasure of Black women's voices; it demands an acknowledgement of Black women's voices, as well as their cultural production and artistic expression. Moreover, Gqola (2011: 09) argues that women's poetry in the post-apartheid era "is as mindful of past institutional forms of violence as it is of the shifting contradictory play of power in the present." In a similar vein, Putuma's poetry is attentive to the hetero-patriarchal influences and violence that still permeate the country's post-transitional social fabric.

Putuma's impassioned recognition of the intellectual agency of Black women within academic discourse, political activism, and literary spheres is conspicuously evident in her poem "Lifeline." The poem consists of an illustrious list of eminent Black women writers,

activists, scholars, and poets, including luminaries such as Audre Lorde, Ellen Kuzwayo, Miriam Tlali, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Myesha Jenkins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Pumla Dineo Gqola, Barbara Boswell, Phillippa Yaa de Villiers, Makhosazana Xaba, Lebo Mashile, Stella Nyanzi, among others. Putuma underscores how these names serve as sources of inspiration for her, chanting, "Black girl – *Live! / Live! / Live!*" (Putuma, 2017:87). The rhythmic exhortation of the refrain "*Live! / Live! / Live!*" emphasises how the mentioned Black women luminaries function as agents of empowerment within the Black women community. The stylistic choice to italicise the refrain, combined with the use of exclamation marks, adeptly reveals the profound impact of the celebrated Black women luminaries while also adding to the celebratory tone of the poem. Concomitantly, the refrain can also be read as connoting a slogan and therefore a call to feminist solidarity and political action. Putuma's impassioned celebration of the labours of Black women luminaries echoes Bey's (2018: 105) avowal that "we will celebrate […] because things have always been trying to kill us. And they, once again, will fail." The speaker's acknowledgement of the mentioned luminaries manifests as a form of resistance that counteracts systemic oppressions and the marginal status of Black women. It consequently validates their intellectual labours and contributions to nurturing spaces for Black existence.

Plausible to also note in the poem is a tripartite manifestation of both resistance and resilience evident at the three key junctures: before the poem, within the poem, and from the poem, all seamlessly woven into the fabric of the poem. The first aspect of resistance and resilience exists in the background and inspiration for the poem; it is discernible in the Black women who are acknowledged by Putuma. Putuma's recognition of these prominent Black women figures illuminates their strategic acts of resistance and resilience, as evident through their literary and other contributions and their determination to create spaces that nurture and speak to the experiences of Black life, especially Black women, despite prevailing systemic

barriers that seek to stifle their voices. The second facet is manifested within the poem itself. It emerges as an influence exerted upon Koleka Putuma herself. Putuma's impassioned celebration and acknowledgement of these Black writers exemplifies Strauss' (2022: 149) "resonant feminist listening," which she explains as attentiveness to the "multisensory" and "multigenerational resonances" inherent in the archives of cultural production and activism of women. In listening to them, Putuma is inspired to "*Live! / Live! / Live!*" (Putuma, 2017: 87).

Accordingly, Putuma's journey of resistance and resilience simultaneously finds its manifestation within her words, her own literary productions. As her poem proves, it is, to follow Gumbs (2016: 41), who pays homage to Harriet Tubman—an American abolitionist and social activist who is known as "Moses of her people" and "conductor of the Underground Railroad"—the "swamp women, the hot springs women, the first cave women, the core of the earth women, the salt, that gave her what she [has]." This kind of resistance and resilience embodied by the Black women that Putuma is inspired by, and indeed Putuma herself, signify a form of fugitive posture of women who "walk, and walk-out, […] women who hope […] despite historical conscriptions of their liveability; women who go undrowned, refusing to go gentle into the oceanic abyss of death" (Bey, 2019: 92).

Concurrently, this facet of resistance and resilience engenders the third form of resistance and resilience. This third facet emanates from the poem to the readers, particularly Black women readers. It serves to empower us to understand the importance of our voices and contributions to society, ultimately fostering a sense of resistance and resilience against the systemic challenges we may encounter. Perhaps, for us to be able to glean empowerment or anything at all from these Black women, we may need to embody the ethos of Strauss' (2022: 149) "resonant feminist listening"—and my work here, this thesis as a whole, attempts to adhere to this ethos. Overall, Putuma's poetic endeavour here brings to the forefront the intellectual labour and agency of Black women, a dimension that often resides on the periphery of

discourse. In doing so, Putuma is carving out an environment where Black women's voices are not only heard but also accorded the appreciation and recognition they merit. This is an endeavour that she also resolutely undertakes in the poem "On Black Solidarity."

In her poem, "On Black Solidarity," Putuma deconstructs the notion of Black solidarity in social movements by revealing the paradoxical nature of how Black male Fallists[4] actively participate in and benefit from the very structures and power dynamics that relegate Black women to the margins. The poem, even though it critiques masculinist and hetero-patriarchal attitudes present in broader social movements, serves as a "backchat," to borrow from Wilken (2019), to the Black male Fallists within the #FeesMustFall social movement protests of 2015 who exhibited similar patriarchal attitudes towards their female counterparts within the movements. Shange (2017: 02), commenting on the marginalisation of women within the #FeesMustFall movements, asserts:

> Black women played an active role during the struggle, but the patriarchy that characterised apartheid society remains to this day as an apartheid hangover, and has seen women's struggles downplayed or silenced by the same [B]lack men who women fought to defend and put into power.

Shange's commentary here highlights the relentless perpetuation of patriarchal attitudes stemming from the apartheid era and their unabated continuation within contemporary social movements; it exposes the hypocrisy of Black men Fallists who reap the rewards of Black women's labours within the movements but consistently diminish their contributions.

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[4] The term "fallists" gained prominence during the 2015 "Rhodes Must Fall" and "Fees Must Fall" movements. It refers to individuals within these movements who align with the ideologies of Pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness, and Black radical feminism. It is worth noting, however, that the embrace of Black radical feminism by Black men within these movements remained a subject of contention in the sense that they failed to fully recognise and acknowledge the oppressions, sacrifices and leadership of Black women within and outside social movements.

It is appropriate, then, that the speaker, in the very opening lines of the poem, asseverates: "Black solidarity does not include making my spine a doormat. / So that you can stand and have a backbone" (Putuma, 2017: 82). In these lines, readers are immediately introduced to the irate tone, candid diction, and confrontational ambience that perfuse the poem. Here, the speaker is revealing how Black solidarity works to benefit only Black men and how it is for them to climb up the social ladder by using Black women as rungs. The use of the metaphor of a spine serving as a doormat highlights the arduous trials that Black women must endure, only for them to be left at the door. Jodi Williams, a student at Stellenbosch University who was advocating for the leadership of Black queer students within the #FeesMustFall movements, expressed—as reported by Cele (2015)—that "most of the time in [the] movements, it is women doing the work – they do the operational running of movements and men get all the glory for it. They get put on a pedestal for it" Similarly, Baderoon (in Xaba, 2018: 08) reminds us that in the anti-apartheid movements, women were allowed to "participate in national struggles only at the cost of silence about their gendered experiences." As lines 1–2 of "On Black Solidarity" reveal, the speaker overtly rejects these practices. The speaker's negation is a form of fugitivity that marks "a kind of outlawish indiscreet disavowal of a disengagement from the project of hegemony" (Bey, 2018: 16). It is a blatant refusal that consequently necessitates change and/or transformative actions.

The speaker remonstrates Black male Fallists' selective recognition of only Black male revolutionaries. She questions: "how come references to your revolution are only limited to biko, fanon and malcom? / Do you read?" (Putuma, 2017: 82). Putuma's choice to eschew capitalisation when referencing these renowned figures serves as a significant form of subversion. It mirrors the lack of recognition and effects of marginalisation that befall Black women, symbolically aligning the lack of capitalisation with the effect of such marginalisation. It is equally conceivable to contend that this form of subversion operates as a

retaliatory strategy, employed to provoke, and incite a reaction from the reader, or more specifically, the Black male reader. The use of rhetorical questions intensifies the paradox that Black men, despite their alignment with the broader objectives of Black solidarity, so often undermine the revolutionary contributions of Black women. Line 15 epitomises this: "your solidarity, it seems, is anchored by undermining Black womxn's struggles" (Putuma, 2017: 83). This simultaneously exposes a hierarchy of visibility and recognition that is sustained by patriarchal structures. Putuma's exposition of these imbalances, to quote Bueti (2022: 73), is a form of "fugitivity [that] transforms invisibility and anonymity into the possibility of liberation." It calls for an acknowledgement of Black women's agency and intellect, positioning them as also thinkers and visionaries of social movements.

Putuma's use of candid diction is similarly consistent in her exposition of Black men's sexualisation and objectification of Black women within social movements. The speaker voices anguish as she states, "we must hand you our faces and vaginas to play tennis with, to make canvases with" (Putuma, 2017: 82). Here, Putuma uses powerful imagery to reveal the degrading dimensions inherent in the objectification and sexualisation of Black women in the movements. In tandem, the metaphor of "play[ing] tennis" and "mak[ing] canvases" with these body parts extends beyond the exposition of abhorrent patriarchal and sexist attitudes espoused by Black men Fallists: it unveils a disturbing disregard for the dignity and autonomy of Black women, ultimately revealing their state of dehumanisation, wherein their existence is circumscribed by the role of fulfilling the gratification of their male counterparts' desires and fantasies.

In "Oh dear God, Please! Not Another rape poem," Putuma exposes the largely ignored, yet disturbingly prevalent, issue of intrafamilial sexual abuse, particularly of minors, perpetrated by uncles. The poem elucidates how the abuse typically manifests, and how families and/or societies choose to be ignorant in its face. In this vein, Putuma is embedding an incisive

social critique, as she lays bare the experiences associated with rape and the collective failure, whether within families or society at large, to acknowledge the harm wrought by acts of sexual violence. The speaker poignantly remarks, “sometimes [hell] is a penis / sometimes [girls] repent just to save themselves from encountering the devil” (Putuma, 2017: 91). Here, Putuma evocatively navigates the harrowing experience of rape, wherein rape survivors feel compelled to “repent”—to change their behaviours, submit, or be compliant—so as to protect themselves from further abuse and/or interaction with the perpetrators.

Putuma does not specify the precise connotation of “repent” in the poem; it could mean choosing not to talk about the experience, disengaging from interpersonal and/or intimate relationships with men, contemplating self-harm or suicide, and so forth. This is so because our societies, owing to the influence of patriarchal systems, have not yet created spaces where perpetrators are held accountable for their crimes without blaming women for the harm inflicted upon them. Gqola (2021: 82) concurs with this perspective, asserting that “patriarchy sees women always blamed for sexual violation, for failure to act appropriately in order to avoid it, and for acting badly as a way of inviting it.” Du Toit (2009: 34) traverses the same terrain, maintaining that “victims of rape suffer doubly when they try to explain the damage within a symbolic order which is systematically deaf to their complaints.” It may therefore compel rape survivors to assume any possible form of “repentance,” as their safety hinges upon it.

The allegorical comparison of a penis to hell, portraying it as a veritable abyss owned by the devil and one from which rape survivors feel the need to repent to extricate themselves, highlights the harrowing nature of the experience, which is marked by agonising burning sensations, as the word “hell” depicts. Gqola (2015:18) affirms this, arguing that “rape is never mild, never minor, never acceptable. It is not just sex.” Subsequently, the speaker contemplates:

> Sometimes [uncle] is a boyfriend. A random. A test you will keep taking but always fail
>
> Sometimes [uncle] is a siren in some living rooms
>
> Sometimes [uncle] is an aircon everyone is too lazy to adjust or switch off. (Putuma, 2017: 91)

As readily discernible, here Putuma makes the term "uncle" a recurring motif, and her choice to place the term within square brackets designates the word as the point of focus and simultaneously impresses upon the reader its significance. In the first line, the speaker astutely reveals the roles usually assumed by the "uncle," the perpetrator—a boyfriend or a random man. In other words, the abuse may manifest as a routine occurrence or occurs randomly, at least from the perspective of the victim, because the perpetrator may have premeditated the action. The notion of "a test you will keep taking but always fail" goes to show the dire prevalence of the issue, revealing the unending cycle of victimisation of rape survivors. Moreover, the metaphorical comparisons of "uncle" to a "siren in some living rooms" and an "aircon that everyone is too lazy to adjust or switch off" reveal the pervasive presence of rapists as lurking dangers, and the prevalent familial indifference and reluctance to confront them. This indifference functions as a protective shield for perpetrators, often in the name of familial privacy; this consequently perpetuates the cycle of violence.

We also read about this problematic uncle in gantsho's poem, "Mama I am Burning," which is about Fezekile "Khwezi" Kuzwayo's sexual assault at the hands of the former South African president, Jacob Zuma[5]. The speaker laments:

> This fire is an uncle you trusted mama.
>
> An uncle who promised to watch me while you were gone.

[5] It is worth noting, however, that Jacob Zuma was acquitted of the crime.

> And while you were gone, in my sleep, the fire burned me mama
>
> […] I am burning mama. Mama, I am burning! (gantsho, 2018: 19)

Similar to Putuma's poem under analysis, the motif of fire or burning is sharply featured in gantsho's poem, illustrating the depth of the psychological turmoil that the speaker or rape survivors endure. Similarly, mupotsa (2018:34), agonises that "these uncles / ask us to be rational / while they rape us." This conveys the apathetic stance adopted by perpetrators towards their victims and the extent of the normalisation of rape. It is thus of considerable merit that these three Black women poets speak of this issue of intrafamilial abuse in all its troubling and pervasive dimensions, impelling us to comprehend the gravity it carries. Their unadulterated exposition of it manifests as a poetics of refusal. It is a fugitive act of "refusing to sit still, refusing to settle, refusing to commit to being" (Bey, 2018: 16). It is a refusal to be subsumed by the force—a refusal for the thing to be as dominant and prevalent as it is without it being altered, or even better, dismantled. It is a refusal to be silenced, a refusal that weakens compliance, conditioning, and the very condition of the thing. Putuma carries forth this undertaking in her poem "Reference List/Bibliography."

In this poem, Putuma exposes the dimensions of patriarchal paradigms, oppressive and derogatory rhetoric, and normative policing ideologies that afflict Black women. As with most of her poems in the collection, the poem takes an unconventional form, manifesting as a list, atypical even of the formats of a reference list, as we assume from the title that it is meant to be a reference list or bibliography. It is, in fact, void of typical attributions or citations, and lists only the issues that Putuma is grappling with. Thus, it might not be beyond reason to construe that Putuma's style of referencing here might bear influence from the "reference list" that led to the University Currently Known as Rhodes (UCKAR) Reference

List protests of 2016, commonly known as the #RUReferenceList protests. These protests constituted a collective outcry against the pervasive rape culture within the university (see Gouws, 2018; Canham and Mathebula, 2022). The "reference list" consisted of only the names of the alleged rapists, devoid of any direct allegations or accompanying descriptions (Seddon, 2016). Therefore, it might not be far-fetched to posit that the form of the poem treads a similar path, albeit in the substitution of naming societal concerns instead of individual names.

Putuma provides a bullet-pointed list of thirty-two reference points—that is, the societal issues she addresses in the poem—which, due to the constraints of this project, I am only able to present a select subset of: "miniskirts / drunk girls / hoes / twerking / slutty behaviour / sluts in general" (Putuma, 2017: 94–95). Here, Putuma unravels the insidious dynamics that maintain the entrenchment of gender-based subjugations. In the quoted lines, we observe the social stratification and the consequential stigmatisation that befall women who deviate from established codes of modesty and behaviours. The terms manifest as cultural markers aimed at censuring and regulating women's clothing choices and behaviours. The patriarchal epithets "hoes" and "sluts" epitomise the degrading means that women get subjected to. Gqola (2021: 76) recognises that such language works to "mark a target of justified ongoing and future violence." She emphasises that

> patriarchy needs these names as stamps on those individuals who are deemed safe to violate and render outcasts. […] Those so attacked recognise that being marked as such is both violence and threat. Those watching now see the attacked in the way described by the slurs. (Gqola, 2021: 75-76)

As we discern from Gqola, patriarchy prescribes and proscribes behavioural norms. It dictates what constitutes appropriate conduct for women, and any deviation from this is met with social sanctions. The consequences of this policing simultaneously extend to legitimise and

justify violence against women who are perceived to have transgressed societal norms concerning appropriate behaviour. This justification process, as intimated in the above analysis of the poem "Oh dear God, Please! Not Another rape poem," often manifests in the form of victim-blaming narratives, such as 'they were asking for it' or 'they have put themselves in harm's way.' Thlabi (2017: 94) covers much of the same ground, making the case that

> we live in a world where women are constantly policed and told not to act in a particular way – not to wear certain clothes, lest they tempt their poor potential abusers. These potential abusers have no agency or self-mastery, and cannot distinguish between right and wrong. They have assumed authority over women's signals and what those signals mean – and they always, conveniently, seem to mean an invitation.

Thlabi's commentary here poignantly exposes the perpetuation of victim-blaming attitudes in society, where women are held liable for the violence perpetrated against them—the perpetrators are assumed to have no agency and are cast as mere victims of the said enticement by the women they harm. Therefore, in writing on such issues, Putuma is astutely combating the silencing of women and consequently mandating a paradigm shift in societal attitudes.

2.3 Black queer woman within the run, on the run

Putuma's commitment to weakening hegemonic control is just as conspicuous in her portrayal of Black queer women's experiences in her poetry collection. It is marked by an incisive exposition of the entrenched hierarchies of influence that perpetuate and legitimise the subjugating and subjecting of queer identities to violence and the subsequent resistance and resilience of these individuals. Her commitment to this cause emerges, as Bey (2019: 92) would put it, as a "politics that rests on affirmations that regulatory barriers can be unmade."

It is an ethos that reflects a form of Black queer insurgency that disrupts societal norms and, as a result, engages in world-making otherwise (see Bey, 2019). This cause similarly echoes Boswell's (2016: 09) idea that "black women's poetic voices are creatively rendering not only critiques of oppression, but imagining new worlds and new ways of being in them." In a parallel vein, Putuma criticises the control of power structures over Black queer women and simultaneously cultivates an environment that embraces and fosters the experiences of these individuals. In doing so, she also encourages the emergence of alternative modes of existence.

In her poem, "No Easter Sunday for Queers[6]," Putuma navigates the intricate interplay between religious doctrines and patriarchal hegemony in exerting control and influence over Black queer women. She elucidates the way religious narratives have and continue to construct societal perceptions and dispositions vis-à-vis queer persons. The poem underscores the complex nature of the speaker's journey, wherein her escape is simultaneously characterised by the constraints inherent to her circumstances. The speaker engages in a process of identity bifurcation, wherein she adapts her self-presentation to navigate both the northern and southern suburbs.

The northern suburb is where she is the "repentance." The southern suburb, in a contrasting vein, is a "different kind of a church"— a "march," a "club" that sees her with "fifty-eleven girls" (Putuma, 2017: 28–30). The speaker realises that the northern suburb "makes [her] salvation panic" and the southern suburb "makes [her] sexuality panic" (Putuma, 2017: 28–30). The northern suburb is "a cage / twenty years of hiding who and how [she] loves;" in it, she remains a "shadow" (Putuma, 2017: 27). The southern suburb, on the other hand, is "a new kind of paranoia / a new kind of hiding" that requires her to wear "another kind of mask"

[6] Putuma has also published a play under the same name, which traverses the same themes as the poem.

(Putuma, 2017: 28–29). As readily observable, the speaker's self remains in duality. But it is the kind of duality that cannot be either of its side. It is a duality characterised by the inability of its constituent facets to achieve a state of being due to their perpetual state of mutual contradiction; the full immersion into one facet is perpetually constrained by its contradictory counterpart, rendering a complete engagement with either facet an unattainable objective. I provide a visual depiction of what I mean below, notwithstanding its suboptimal quality; it shall nevertheless communicate the intended message—you may need to have a moment with it.

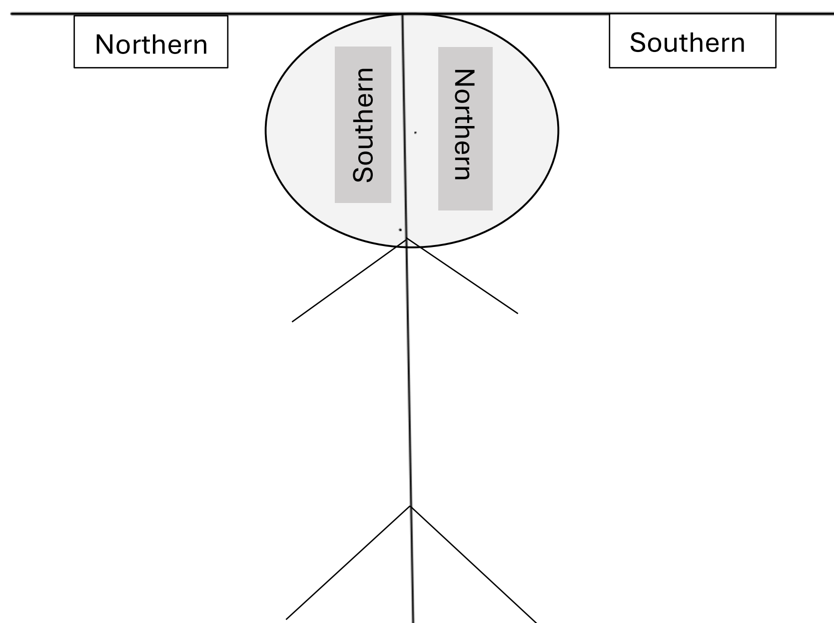

Figure 1. Speaker's self-duality

As we better discern from Figure 1, the speaker's self indeed remains in duality, and should the speaker gravitate towards the northern suburbs, southern influences arise in contradiction, and vice versa, ultimately rendering the self in dialectical contradiction. The self remains in fugitive suspense; it is caught both in confinement and escape. It is in motion, albeit a motion

in stillness. As Priest (2018: 475) affirms, “someone practicing fugitivity lives within the thing, within the confines of the thing, is of the thing, but also exists in conflict with the thing’s systems.” Similarly, the speaker is in motion—a motion in stillness, within the thing that keeps the body in stillness—a stillness that is in the creation of its fugitive space, in motion towards its fugitive freedom.

We also observe that the speaker faces existential peril within the environments she attempts to inhabit when she reveals: “the North says my body belongs in hell / The South says my body belongs in a dump / in both spaces, my body is at the mercy of men” (Putuma, 2017: 29). Here, we see an interplay of religious and patriarchal ideologies; they intersect and mutually reinforce each other—what religious doctrines set forth, the male patriarch enacts, at least when it is against a female. As argued by Gqola (2021: 66) “to be female is to also be excessive and therefore legitimately kept under control, through both violence and the threat of violence.” Putuma’s idea that in both the northern and southern suburbs, her body remains at the “mercy of men” reveals who assumes this role of keeping the female under control that Gqola is alluding to here.

Hereafter, the speaker, quoting the Christian bible, exposes how the northern suburbs advocate for the killing of queer individuals, that “they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them” (Putuma, 2017: 29). The Southern suburbs are then portrayed as agents through which the killings materialise. This is proof of how queer individuals, particularly queer women in South Africa, face discrimination and violence because of their sexual orientation—and Black queer women remain the most frequently victimised (Khuzwayo, 2023). Putuma’s poem underscores that religious institutions and their doctrinal frameworks have engendered and fostered such social legitimation of violence. It is the kind of social legitimation that renders violence towards queer persons acceptable and justifiable:

“she was queer / a sodomite / a sin / a sinful act” (Putuma, 2017: 31). In the ensuing phase, we see the speaker embody a fugitive spirit to confront this injustice:

> I am holding up a banner/ a book with sex positions for lesbians / the upbringing / the coming out/ the salvation of women’s bodies that have saved me from hiding. (Putuma, 2017: 31)

This sharp escape manoeuvre signifies a pivotal juncture in which the speaker’s quest for liberation supersedes external judgement and discrimination. We may discern here that the speaker’s resilience, so far, in enduring oppression serves as an impetus driving the rationale to embody acts of resistance: in a reciprocal manner, her acts of resistance become a driving force for her resilience in the quest for liberation—a resilience that, in turn, nurtures her commitment to resistance.

The speaker takes a subversive rhetorical shift by imagining the promulgation of the deaths of queer persons in lieu of the death of Jesus Christ. This strategic pivot concurrently challenges religious doctrines and societal conventions. She imagines her father preaching about a Calvary whose stone is “rolled over queer bodies,” about the “blood of queer bodies” (Putuma, 2017: 32–33). She envisions him proclaiming that “some will not remember the Calvary of queer bodies,” and how this crucifixion remains an “unpreached,” “unnamed,” and “unrecorded” gospel (Putuma, 2017: 32). Putuma here engages in what Moten (2017) calls the creation of a plot against a plot, a fugitive manoeuvre enacted through a subversive and/or rebellious articulation that can be understood as simultaneous acts of ordering and disordering. It is a counter-narrative that is aimed at interrupting a dominant narrative in order to foreground a marginalised, hitherto-neglected narrative. This then elevates the significance of the marginalised narrative to parity with, if not precedence over, the prevailing narrative. In this context, the symbolic import of the crucifixion of Christ is juxtaposed or levelled to

parity with the crucifixion of queer persons. Through this juxtaposition, Putuma ostensibly compels readers to acknowledge the issue at hand, or at the very least, acknowledge how it is a "gospel that goes unpreached" (Putuma, 2017: 32).

Conclusion

In my engagement with Putuma's *Collective Amnesia*, I am attuned to the profound resonance that her collection carries with regard to the intersections of unequal power structures and the imperative for spirits of resistance and resilience to subvert and weaken them. I used Crenshaw's intersectionality as a foundational framework and Moten's fugitivity as an augmentative lens through which I dissect the contours of resistance and resilience embedded in Putuma's collection. I observe a symbiotic relationship between strategies of resistance and resilience embedded in Putuma's work—the strategies of resistance impel the need for resilience in the ongoing struggle for liberation, and the strategies of resilience, in turn, fortify the acts of resistance. I use the concept of intersectionality to trace the intersecting forms of oppression that beset Black people. I examine the ways in which Putuma subverts white imagination, along with its colonial underpinnings, which have historically shaped and dominated Black experiences. Moreover, I look at the intersecting forms of oppression that affect Black women, with a stretched focus on the ways in which hetero-patriarchal influences, gender-subjugations, and violence, intersect and manifest. I then examine how Black queer women are also ensnared within this web of subjugation. My application of the concept of fugitivity underscores how these forms of oppression are subverted, refused, and interrogated. I consider Putuma's collection as a poetics of refusal, a fugitive poetics concerned with disrupting the status quo and fostering future-oriented sociabilities.

Chapter 3: Black feminist fugitive Spill[7]: waves of escape, fight and flight in vangile gantsho's *red cotton* (2018)

> Open your mouth. Now give us what you found.
>
> –Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Dub: Finding Ceremony* (2020)

vangile gantsho's poetry novella, *red cotton* (2018), unfolds through the lens of its protagonist, smallgirl.[8] It is through smallgirl that the narrative exists and is laid bare before the reader. Consequently, the reader inhabits the manifold dimensions of smallgirl's world, with the narrative voice oscillating between first-person, second-person, and third-person perspectives. The reader is made an intrepid voyager to navigate through the labyrinthine corridors of smallgirl's lived experiences, consciousness, and ruminations. I designate the reader as an 'intrepid' voyager because of their warranted and privileged access even to the innermost sanctum of smallgirl's psyche. Throughout the poetry novella, smallgirl spills forth waves of escape, fight, and flight from the tendrils of societal norms, patriarchy and its acts of violence, the hegemony of heteronormativity, and the white gaze. Through her cascading spills, readers are swept into the swirling currents of her escape spirits as well as her double embodiment of fight and flight that she uses to loosen all that is asphyxiating her. In each spill, gantsho's dedication to disrupting the normative order is laid bare. The narrative is ever-expressive, unapologetic, ponder-provoking, non-conforming, at times gnarly, at times unsettling—but always forthright.

[7] My formulation of this title draws inspiration from Gumbs' first instalment in her poetic trilogy, *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity* (2016). Revisiting Gumbs' text during the analysis in the chapter helped me capture better my reading of gantsho's (2018) anthology as an overflowing stream of expression to the reader. The epigraph, sourced also from Gumbs' last instalment, *Dub: Finding Ceremony* (2020), proved a boon to capturing gantsho's (2018) poetic outpouring.
[8] gantsho opts not to capitalise and separate the name both in the collection and outside, and in honour of this choice, I follow suit in the chapter.

Throughout this thesis, I conceptualise resistance and resilience as symbiotic forces that make liberation possible, where one remains insufficient without the other. Together, they forever beckon one another forth. In the resistance, resilience stands sentinel, offering support to ensure its long run. In the resilience of resistance, resistance is assured to succeed. In the triumph of resistance, resilience finds its sustenance. Should one falter, the other comes to the rescue. I consider the work of the Black women writers under study—gantsho, Putuma, and mupotsa—to be borne out of their embodiment of the symbiotic energy of resistance and resilience, especially considering Black women writers' long confinement by power structures. smallgirl's embodiment of this symbiotic energy is also palpable in the text, starting from her escape desires to her actual fight and/or flight from the suffocating grip of the intersecting systems of control.

My application of Kimberle Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality in this chapter zooms in on the intersections of oppressive structures that continue to haunt Black women and Black queer women. Intersectionality illuminates the complex interplay of power structures such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, which converge to perpetuate marginalisation (Crenshaw, 1989; May, 2015; Gouws, 2017). In the context of South Africa, as I have noted before, the racial stratification implemented by the apartheid regime relegated Black women to the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, with whites occupying the upper rungs, followed by Indians and Coloureds and Black men occupying a slightly elevated position above Black women (see Gouws, 2017; Pirtle, 2022). This historical framework elucidates the enduring convergence of power systems oppressing Black women. Ergo, in this chapter, I examine how gantsho—alongside Putuma in *Collective Amnesia* (2017) and mupotsa in *feeling and ugly* (2018)—portrays the ways in which Black women and Black queer women confront the intersections of patriarchy and its outbreaks of violence, the

implications of the white gaze and/or colonial constructs as well as the hegemony of heteronormativity.

My reading of gantsho's anthology as an overflowing stream of expression compels me to extend my use of Moten's (2003) concept of fugitivity in the study to attend to the act of fugitive listening. Fugitivity underscores a refusal of oppressive structures made manifest by an inherent yearning for escape (Harney and Moten, 2013; Moten, 2018). The refusal takes a form of flight within the oppressive structure, not away from it, for there is no elsewhere (Priest, 2018; Anucha, 2023). This means that the fugitive remains in a perpetual state of fight and flight. Fugitive listening then attends to those voices roaming in space, fighting in flight. Brooks (2020: 13) aptly describes it as "a modality that embraces those voices – Indigenous, Black, femme, queer, trans […] – that have previously been dismissed as noise." It attends to the "stentorian voices of the marginalized; the undiscovered songbirds; the illest artists you'll never know; the slain dark-skinned angels" (Bey, 2018: 14). It is a recognition of the "sounds from the undercommons" (Brooks, 2020: 01). The telos of the fugitive listener, therefore, becomes not merely to listen to such voices "out of some desire to incorporate them into liberal conceptions of the public sphere, but rather to radically transform our [their] conception of the public sphere" (Brooks, 2020: 19). This is the undertaking that gantsho necessitates for her readers, out of her giving, to harken back to Gumbs (2020).

In my fugitive listening, I am simultaneously attentive to Strauss' (2022: 22) concept of resonant feminist listening—a methodological approach of "engaging feminism's multisensory affective archive." Resonant feminist listening, she explains, "requires attending to the repeated historical censoring, disciplining, and erasure of feminist feeling in South Africa, and to bring these feelings into the present to feminist ends" (Strauss, 2022: 22). In light of this framework, in this chapter, I engage in a multi-dimensional listening, attuned to

the voice's resonance prior, within, and after the poem. I designate the voice as that which makes the word visible, as that which is the word itself, is the word in the absence of the word, and is in the word.

To sum up, in this chapter, I read gantsho's collection as a spilling out, consisting of waves of expression propelled to the shore, the reader. I dissect how smallgirl spills forth her narrative, fostering imaginings of escape, fight, and flight. Attentive to the symbiotic relationship of resistance and resilience, which I contend to be indispensable for the attainment of liberation, I explore how gantsho, through her protagonist, smallgirl, imagines possibilities of escape and/or liberation. Subsequently, I delve into the strategies employed by gantsho to challenge systems of power, particularly through the concepts of fight and flight. I specifically examine how gantsho awakens readers from the societal conditioning of patriarchal violence, and consequently carving out avenues of fighting or fleeing, both of which are fundamentally intertwined as acts of resistance against patriarchal dominance. I then analyse how flight manifests as a form of resistance in the celebration of Black queer women's experiences and the reclamation of the Black female body as depicted by gantsho, Putuma and mupotsa. I scrutinise how Black queer women, as portrayed in the three poets' texts, exist in flight from the hegemony of heteronormativity and the white gaze while also within them.

3.1 Spirit of Escape: smallgirl rising[9]

Within the crucible of a society still navigating its emergence from the shadows of apartheid while contending with the formidable forces of racial subordination, patriarchal structures, homophobia, and enduring societal pressures encumbering, particularly, Black women, the burgeoning literary landscape of Black women writers resonates with a palpable spirit of escape. Their literary domain emerges as a battleground where the forces of confinement and

[9] I take this title from gantsho's #smallgirlrising initiative (and movement), which is about the evolution and revolution of smallgirl, herself as a Black woman and a poet.

escape converge. Baderoon (cited in Xaba, 2018: 05) reminds us that "despite being shunted to the side, women have been acting, changing, thinking and envisioning a world made whole by their presence." They now, through their literary works, stake claim to their discursive power and etch their existence (Maqagi cited in Xaba, 2018: 63). Their works manifest as a "refusal [that] marks the point of a limit having been reached: we refuse to continue on this way" (McGranahan, 2016: 320). They refuse to be tethered to and remain within the limitations imposed by oppressive hegemonies. Such a flight, to echo Anucha (2023: 45), is one "in which dreaming, fantasy, speculation, hope and collectivity gain heightened value and potency." In their escape spirits, they proffer a map towards metamorphosis and rejuvenation, a blueprint for transformation and renewal.

In the very first poem of the collection, "I am Standing in the Middle of the Road," gantsho alerts the reader to the impending arrival of smallgirls, a cohort embodying a radical feminine energy that carries forces of transformation and renewal and to which the protagonist, smallgirl, belongs. The speaker articulates: "something frozen catches the wind / whispers a maybe into the rain / chanting-humming far away / a brewing storm of smallgirls coming" (gantsho, 2018: 02). Here, readers are immediately alerted to the leitmotif of escape that pervades the collection. The speaker's desire for escape in the poem is sustained by hope, a hope that is fortified by the events that validate the anticipation of the upcoming storm. The speaker, keenly attuned to these events, is a fugitive in hope of freedom—as we know, "fugitivity is not freedom, or not yet" (Sexton in Omelsky, 2020: 66). Her escape desire is to flee the "something frozen," the conditions of the present; she enacts a "desire for the outside" (Moten, 2018: 131). Concurrently, the metaphor of something frozen catching the wind signifies a state of prolonged stasis that is now subject to dissolution by the wind, a disruptive force propelled by the upcoming storm of smallgirls. The dissolution consequently leads to the coming of rain, suggesting a release of pent-up elements and the unfolding of

new conditions. Thus, the speaker's optimistic disposition can be construed as a desire to "flee the confines of all that's decaying and crumbling" (Omelsky, 2020: 59). The auditory imagery of chanting and humming conveys a sense of forewarning regarding the transformative storm that looms and creates an atmospheric tension indicative of the impending upheaval.

Readers get formally introduced to the character of smallgirl in the poem "smallgirl." The poem is narrated by an omniscient observer who becomes an intimate vessel for smallgirl and channels her musings. It opens with a palpable ascent of smallgirl's self-apotheosis, yet gradually transitions into a poignant narrative of her abnegation. The speaker observes: "smallgirl with moths in her mouth / speaks anger in glances   knows the dagger of words / smallgirl   big voice   moves in silence / knows how earthquakes begin" (gantsho, 2018: 11). Important to first recognise here are the alternating rhythms and pauses that establish the tone of the poem as melancholic and tinged with harshness. In the opening line, the consonantal harmony evident in the "th" sounds of "with, moths, mouth" engenders a euphonious effect that also seamlessly intertwines with the softness of the "her" sound. This mellifluous cadence simultaneously works to strengthen the imagery of moths as it subtly imitates their gentle fluttering of wings.

Per contra, the subsequent lines surge forth with cacophonous vigour. For example, the staccato rhythm produced by the clipped syllables in "speaks," "glances," and "big," and the plosive consonants p, k, g, d, q, and b in "speaks," "glances," "dagger," "big," "earthquakes," and "begin" (gantsho, 2018: 11) resonate with a jarring dissonance that ruptures the smoothness established earlier. This abrupt shift mirrors the tumultuous emotional landscape inhabited by smallgirl as she grapples with societal impositions thrust upon her. Moreover, the extended pauses between "glances" and "knows" and before and after "big voice," along with the poem's overall enjambments, punctuate the narrative discordantly by pausing where

unexpected and progressing where a pause might have been fitting. This effectively conveys the intensity of the turmoil that is persistently besieging smallgirl.

The eerie imagery of smallgirl's mouth consisting of moths reveals the transformative potential of her words, as moths typically symbolise transformation. Despite harbouring such profound potential, line 2—"speaks anger in glances knows the dagger of words" (gantsho, 2018: 11)—underscores her inclination towards silence and that she chooses to only convey her anger through her eyes, for she is aware of the potency of her words. Discernible herein is the resilience spirit of smallgirl, as she remains resilient in her need to be silent. Silence here then "becomes not only a withdrawal from dialogue but at once an important way to resist" (Wright, 2018: 130). She has turned it into a refuge where weapons to demolish it are carved. It is her temporary flight, her momentary "slide away," as Kelley (2021: 184) would formulate it, that is sustained by the hope of imminent change, the earthquake: "she knows how earthquakes begin" (gantsho, 2018: 11). Just as earthquakes originate from the gradual accumulation of stress along fault lines, smallgirl embodies an incremental buildup preceding a monumental breakthrough. The imagery of her big voice moving in silence—which symbolises the silent workings of seismic forces preceding a seismic activity—emerges as a fugitive act of "everyday resistance that might be reconceived within an ongoing praxis of fugitivity, always in process, always in motion" (Kelley, 2021: 184). She remains in motion towards the precipice of transformation.

Putuma, in her poem "Growing up Black and womxn," echoes the same sentiments as gantsho regarding the pervasive silencing of Black women from a tender age, arguing that growing up Black and woman "will teach you / how to hoard skeletons / how to duct tape your screams with staples / so everyone can flip to the next page without hassle" (Putuma, 2017: 26). Putuma's words here help us to discern better the rationale behind smallgirl's taciturn resolve, that silence is what is socially acceptable and expected of her. The

penultimate line of the poem "smallgirl" reveals that smallgirl's silence is indeed learned, as she laments: "smallgirl must learn to swallow" (gantsho, 2018: 11). The agony expressed by smallgirl of having to internalise and swallow her struggles mirrors the burden described by Putuma (2017: 26) of "hoarding skeletons" and having to duct tape one's screams. This is to keep things as they are, to maintain the status quo, as speaking out disrupts the harmony of hegemony and/or societal rule.

smallgirl, however, knows that this silence is but a fleeting interlude, for the seeds of rupture are sprouting: the storm is brewing, the earthquake is on the horizon—the silence, once enforced, now dissipates at the precipice of rupture. Certainly, the work of gantsho, Putuma, and mupotsa, as this thesis proves, take part in the brewing storm forewarned by gantsho. Their resistance to this silencing is "a rejection of the status quo as livable" (Campt, 2019: 83). They are refusing to accept that their experiences are of lesser significance (Baderoon in Xaba, 2018: 05). Their resistance is sustained by their resilience, and their resistance fortifies the need to remain resilient in the process of resistance. Out of this symbiosis, as I have been arguing, comes the destruction of the normative order and the creation of new imaginaries. Bey (2018: 70) extols the creation of new imaginaries as a "Black radical feminist tradition," one that sees their "claim to power is not recognized, and in that nonrecognition, the power cannot hold." In their perceived insignificance, they create a whole new life—a testament to "no-things'" insistence on social life (Moten, 2018: x). McKittrick (cited in Moore, 2020: 24) captures this argument quite eloquently, clarifying that those who "no one knows" may guide us towards novel terrains in spatial production. mupotsa, in her poem "Little Girls Playing in a Circle," portrays the genesis of this with glaring clarity.

In the poem, mupotsa helps us to understand better the fugitive space—what Harney and Moten (2013: 132) would describe as a "gathering in the break of all those already broken voices"— which smallgirl and her peers occupy to carve tools for the necessary

transformation. Instead of smallgirls though, mupotsa refers to them as “little girls.” The speaker narrates: “little girls playing in a circle, / circle to hands / hands to claps / claps to smile / smiles to skipping / skipping to laughter / laughter to flying / flying to moths” (mupotsa, 2018: 07). Through the deft use of anadiplosis, mupotsa portrays this play space as buoyantly spirited yet methodically structured, unveiling a sense of collective feminist fugitive motion that is maintained in the cohort.

Contrary to the “speaking anger in glances” elucidated by gantsho and the necessity to “duct tape” one’s screams and “hoard skeletons” underscored by Putuma (2018: 26), this play space exudes buoyancy characterised by “smiling,” “laughter,” “flying,” and a sense of togetherness. This supports Moten’s (2018: 186) argument that “there’s another way of living that exhausts imposed arrangements. It’s where and how people fight.” For the little girls, theirs is a “party for self-defence,” a feminist fugitive cohort “activated in refusal,” consisting of “a range of fantastic” happenings for the needed transformation (Moten, 2018:186; Moten, 2018: 66). Additionally, their collective feminist fugitive motion highlights a sense of belonging that is rooted in shared values and collective consciousness (Matandela, 2017: 17). Together, they embark on a journey towards wholeness, healing, and transformation, where empowering modes of connection supersede means of separation.

Noteworthy is the concluding line, “flying to moths,” which introduces an evocative image of transformation, as suggested by the transition to moths. Moths go through four key stages of life: from egg to caterpillar, then pupa, and finally, adult moth. Thus, it stands to reason that, before their metamorphosis into moths, the little girls were caterpillars, and their fugitive space is a transformative cocoon in which they metamorphose into moths—a metamorphosis facilitated by the guiding principles of the cohort. The little girls’ metamorphosis elegantly encapsulates Bey’s (2018: 142) notion of Black feminist fugitive praxis: “so we look to the flesh, work it and werq it, to get its feel, its fecundity, its escapeful pirouette.” Their

endeavour is a collective feminist fugitive imagining "dedicated to the collectivity of its future, the collectivity that may come to be its future" (Anucha, 2023: 188). And so, in their moth form, they remain in flight, "runaway subjects who can't and won't be contained," to emulate Bey (2018: 146).

The smallgirls' ultimate telos is ingenuously portrayed to readers by gantsho in the poem "An Old Bride Who Pays for Her Own Lobola." The speaker observes: "here there are blooming weeds blossoming lava / […] a brewing storm of smallgirls coming" (gantsho, 2018: 28). Here, readers are offered a clear picture of smallgirls'—now also embodying the disruptive energy of lava—intent to annihilate the normative order. While I acknowledge the multivalent interpretations harboured by the notion of "blooming weeds," for the argumentative trajectory thus established, it suggests new growth, signalling the consummation of the old, perhaps by the little girls, which they later shed off. In this case, however, the blooming weeds are poised to be obliterated by the blossoming lava, the upcoming storm of smallgirls—not through consumption, but by annihilation. The second caesura, in particular—the extended spacing between "weeds" and "blossoming"—accentuates the precariousness of progress between the "blooming weeds" and the "blossoming lava." Their coexistence is tenuous, for the blossoming lava is destined to intrude upon the blooming weeds.

In essence, the smallgirls are the "blossoming lava," the trembling earthquake, the brewing storm that is set to demolish the growing disbursement of the blooming weeds. They are, what vangile gantsho, in a conversation with Barbara Boswell and Natalie Diaz, refers to as

> the swelling of the ocean and the coming together of many and [the] feminine energy that is coming alive and is alive and is brewing and is magical and dangerous and incredibly powerful. (PEN South Africa, 2022)

They are a cohort founded on the premise to "tear […] shit down completely and build something new" (Harney and Moten, 2013: 152). Their mission transcends mere abolition; it is the creation of a new society (Bey, 2018: 83). Their abolitionist fervour is poignantly manifest in their literary works. It is what reverberates through the very warp and weft of the collections under study. It is what pervades the core of this thesis. It is, by virtue, the Black feminist talk—the indomitable force of the Black woman narrative, the Black woman's unsilence, the Black woman's unbridled voice.

3.2 Untying the suffocating noose of patriarchy and its violences

Patriarchy, with its violent machinations, persists as a haunting spectre in the lives of women and those it deems 'other.' Indeed, as Gqola (2021: 66) cogently observes, "under patriarchy, violence is simultaneously ever-present and promised." The perennial question of how patriarchy could be rendered asunder remains with options of fight or flight, which, in any way, one means the other; that is, fight is flight and flight is fight—they are both bound by the common thread of resistance. Neither of the two strategies guarantees immediate or complete demolishment of patriarchy; rather, they are acts of refusal to be ensnared by patriarchy's oppressive mould. I take gantsho's unmitigated portrayal of the violences of patriarchy as avenues through which possibilities of fight and flight could be ascertained. gantsho's poetry acts as a mirror, reflecting to us the harsh realities of patriarchy's suffocating grip. Such feminist determination, to concur with Strauss (2022: 156), works in "conscientizing a new generation of women to the work that remains to be done" and to refuse "the recrudescent terms of misogynist affective coercion that would see fear override collective feminist agency." This makes their literary works, to borrow from Xaba (2018: 16), "feminist acts" and "literary events" that work to fortify the "collective feminist agency" that

Strauss (2022: 156) talks about. In their works, we find both a call to arms and an invitation to flight.

In the poem “Taxi Ride,” gantsho explores the complexities of power dynamics and vulnerabilities of navigating public spaces as a woman and/or female in post-apartheid South Africa. She uncovers the prevalence of male dominance, the male gaze, and objectification of women in even seemingly banal situations such as a taxi ride. The speaker recounts: “he owns the pavement / he owns the street / he owns everyone in the taxi/ the taxi driver owns my thighs / I focus on remembering my multiples of twelve” (gantsho, 2018: 21). Instantly, the anaphora “he owns” in the first three lines highlights the pervasive patriarchal attitudes wielded by the taxi driver. In South Africa, the taxi industry predominantly compromises male drivers who embody patriarchal authority (Gibbs, 2014; Eagle and Kwele, 2021). They assert territorial control and repeatedly reinforce dominance (Eagle and Kwele, 2021).

Likewise, the taxi driver in the poem, by virtue of his occupation, readily assumes a position of authority and control over his immediate environments: the pavement and the street are in his dominion, and the people inside the taxi fall under his sway. Such overt assertion of dominance and its acceptance “marks public space as belonging to those who claim ownership over others” (Gqola, 2021:38). This concurrently reveals the broader entrenchment of societal norms that equate masculinity with dominance and dominance with masculinity, and this makes the taxi driver, as he has already established himself, the male authority over his domain. Consequent to these factors, the use of taxis necessitates deference to the authorial figures in this setting (Eagle and Kwele, 2021: 03). As we can discern from the poem, there is no reproach towards the taxi driver’s behaviour by passengers in the taxi, owing to the extent of patriarchal conditioning as well as the implicit threat of violence inherent in patriarchy. His behaviour is rationalised and rendered acceptable through societal norms that uphold male dominance, authority, and even violence. Rubaya (2021: 03) warns

that such patriarchal conditioning results in grievous male practices being treated as "the norm […] as if they could not be questioned." Parallelly, the commuters in the poem are inured to the taxi driver's behaviour by the permissive patriarchal constructs that have sanctioned it.

Concurrently, the dominance of the taxi driver impinges upon the autonomy of those subjected to it, as depicted in line 3 of the poem where the speaker reluctantly resigns herself to the objectification of her thighs for the taxi driver's gratification. Eagle and Kwele's (2021: 03) cogent point that, among other violences, "women using public transport face additional stressors to their male counterparts in being exposed to gender-based harassment" resonates poignantly in the poem. The speaker further highlights the taxi driver's encroachment on her body in the second stanza, articulating, "his hands are sandpapering through my dress" (gantsho, 2018: 21). In the third stanza, she discloses, "the sandpaper reaches for an ashtray in between my legs" (gantsho, 2018: 21). The speaker further unveils in the culminating stanza: "the gear stick makes one last attempt on my thighs" (gantsho, 2018: 21). The male gaze of the old man revealed in line 27: "the grey-haired man is ogling my chest" (gantsho, 2018: 21) goes to show the pervasive and ingrained nature of female objectification, one that even transcends vast age differences.

The invasive acts of sexual harassment by the taxi driver inflicted upon the speaker, alongside the gaze of the elderly man, speak to the perennial scourge of masculine control, male dominance, the male gaze, and violence that work to remind women that "nothing belongs to us—not even our bodies, neither in private nor in public spaces" (Gqola, 2021:19). Gqola aptly calls this phenomenon the "Female Fear Factory," and its machinations and consequences are conspicuously evident in the poem, starting from the driver's hegemonic masculinity to the passengers' passive acquiescence and the speaker's resigned acceptance of being objectified. Undoubtedly, the speaker is young, as she must still recall multiples of

twelve, thus rendering her response as learned helplessness and passivity in the face of patriarchal violence.

The question that immediately arises here is: what could a child, still grappling with multiplication tables, possibly do to fight a man, driving a taxi, who subjects her to sexual harassment? The options are scant, if not non-existent. In fact, the speaker knows better than to scream. Undoubtedly, patriarchy has assured women that they are better without resorting to self-defence and should instead await the grace of the perpetrator to be free (Eltahawy cited in Gqola, 2021: 78). Thus, "because passivity is dictated as an appropriate response to patriarchal violence, we learn early that it is better to do nothing in order to remain safer" (Gqola, 2021: 80). Therefore, the speaker's passivity is not innate but learned—it is a product of early indoctrination into patriarchal norms, or as Gqola (2021) would put it, "fluency in the Female Fear Factory." Furthermore, the metaphor of the taxi driver's hands being sandpaper, emphasising their roughness, serves to illustrate the discomfort the speaker feels as well as her sense of helplessness. This extends to show that one's maturation and even lifelong existence are invariably entwined with the omnipresence of patriarchy and its machinations.

In closing, gantsho, in the poem, unveils the underbelly of patriarchal dominance, exposing its machinations, the unsettling acquiescence it instils in society, and how it thrives on the very acquiescence it imposes. Truly, our patriarchal societies remain to "justify men's agency in everyday sexually intrusive behaviours and rape" by blaming "women for sexually 'provoking' men" (Aissa and Mkinsi, 2024: 74). Thus, gantsho's feminist manoeuvre in the poem is to critique the societal idée fixe of women as provocateurs of violence perpetrated against them because of their clothing choices and conduct. She asks us: what justifications do we have for sexual harassment perpetrated by an old man against a school learner? Was she drunk? Was her garb too revealing? Our patriarchal societies weave a narrative where blame, if not cast upon the woman, paints the perpetrator as a 'sick' man, unworthy of the

title ‘man.’ Such rhetoric merely masks the epidemic of male violence that continues to plague societies.

In the poem “Two Beautiful Men Push Me onto a Bed,” gantsho extends her depiction of the machinations of patriarchy to include its dire consequence, rape. Patriarchy intertwines with myriad forms of dominance, and among its manifestations is the spectre of rape (Tunney, 2012; Johnson, 2014). Patriarchy is responsible for the sexual violence women experience, stripping them of their very right to exist (Tunney, 2012; Yesufu, 2022). gantsho delves into this harrowing reality with piercing clarity. The speaker laments:

> two beautiful men push me onto a bed. one puts his knees on my wrists and covers my mouth. the other puts his knees on my ankles and unzips his pants. the man on my wrist shoves his tongue down my throat. the unzipped man pulls my panties down my legs. he is a tree stub inside me. with roots tying my legs to the ground. it’s his tongue inside my mouth now. maybe i am the ground. and he isn’t digging. maybe he is trying to pull his roots out of me. pulling. and pulling. and pulling. maybe he is stuck inside me. the man on my wrists has a gun to my head. he rubs it against my hair, grunting. he is now unzipped. the tree stub is on my wrists. all i feel is the first shot. everything else is him moving. and breathing. and licking the tears down the side of my face. (gantsho, 2018: 44)

If there is one thing that gantsho excels at, it is giving readers things in their rough, bare, and even indigestible nature. As manifest in the poem, her narrative is bare, imagery rich, gripping, jaw clenching, stomach-churning—and all too raw and unsettling. She employs a relentless progression of imagery, with each image layered upon the last with an intense spill. Take, for instance, the second assailant’s actions: we go from seeing him unzipping his pants to him being a tree stub inside the speaker, to him pressing his knees on the speaker’s ankles to maintain her on the ground, to the speaker being his ground, to him digging, pulling and pulling, stuck inside the speaker. Indubitably, as Gqola (2021: 66) argues, “to be dominable is also to be penetrable.” Sharing the same sentiment, Johnson (2014: 67) makes it clear that

“although sexual violence certainly involves how some men feel and behave, it goes beyond this to include patterns rooted in patriarchy as a whole.” The two men’s unspeakable violence towards the speaker is sustained by their dominance granted to them by patriarchy.

Equally despicable is the depiction of the first assailant’s inhumanity: he is portrayed pressing a gun against the speaker’s head, grunting. The auditory imagery of him grunting vividly conveys his indifference. This extends to reflect the insidious grasp of patriarchy in its perpetuation of stereotypes that allow men to validate their hegemonic masculinity through acts of violence and assertion of sexual prowess (Tunney, 2012:203). Moreover, the imagery of him callously licking off the speaker’s tears accentuates his inhumane nature. Gqibitole (2020: 92) cannot be more exhausted with excuses that justify rape when he judges that “rape is a criminal act that cannot be justified. It is self-serving because the perpetrator derives pleasure and gains a sense of power from it.” The two assailants’ brutal nature, revelling in their inhumanity as they derive pleasure from the speaker even with her crying, proves Gqibithole’s (2022) argument.

The haunting imageries of the first assailant with his knees on the speaker’s wrists and covering her mouth, the second assailant placing his knees on her ankles, and the first assailant rubbing the gun against the speaker’s head speak to the extent of humiliation, dehumanisation, and objectification that the speaker endures. She is completely stripped bare of her humanity, reduced to a mere object to be penetrated by all means available. Moor, Ben-Meir, Golan-Shapira, and Farchi (2013: 1055) discern these elements—the experience of humiliation, dehumanisation, and objectification during rape—as precursors of peritraumatic immobility. In like manner, subsequent scenes in the poem reveal the speaker’s surrender to numbness, as she only “feels the first shot” of the first assailant and “everything else is him moving. And breathing” (gantsho, 2018:44). The speaker’s traumatic paralysis is also highlighted by the pacing and relentless pauses in her narration, further conveying the

psychological toll exacted by such trauma. Important to also note here is the speaker's description of her assailants as "beautiful men." This challenges the societal perception of rapists as disenfranchised or less normal than other people. Gqola (2015: 144) prompts us to recognise that "there is no consensus on what characteristics are to be found in someone who is likely to rape." Rapists are, in fact, normal, ordinary people (Gqola, 2015: 144).

gantsho's choice to present this narrative in such raw and visceral detail compels readers not merely to sympathise with the speaker but to bear witness to the horrors the speaker endures. We are made to inhabit the scene, even though passively and haplessly. In a country where the voices of survivors often drown in the clamour of patriarchy, many victims retreat in silence because their experiences fail to align with preconceived notions of what a rape scene should look like (Tlhabi, 2017: 102). Thus, gantsho's (2017) choice not to spare us mercy in the description of such a heinous act is certainly deliberate, especially considering our country's grim honour of being the rape capital of the world. Her narrative disrupts our complacency, awakening us from our habitual numbness to such atrocities. Concomitantly, gantsho's raw, exposing narrative serves to "affirm that naming and shaming rapists is a legitimate black feminist response to patriarchal violence" (Dlakavu, cited in Strauss, 2022: 154). It validates that in whatever form violence may manifest, it is possible to name it as is; we should not feel the need to sanitise its reality. Indeed, to return to Gumbs (2020), by opening her mouth and giving us what she has found, gantsho's work here materialises, to go back to Strauss (2022) and Xaba (2018), as a feminist act and a literary event that conscientises us to the haunting grip of patriarchal violence. The brewing storm, the blossoming lava, the earthquake on the horizon is summoning Black women, calling us to weld weapons to untie ourselves from the noose of the cruelties of patriarchy.

3.3 Fiery, voracious Black queer women eros

I title this section daringly in concert with the courageous reclamation of the Black female body by the poets under study—gantsho, Putuma, and mupotsa—from dominant narratives that have denigrated their bodies and sexualities. From the colonial and transatlantic slave trade periods, white supremacy constructed and propagated the distorted image of Black women as animalistic, hypersexual, lascivious, and prone to prostitution (Marshall, 2011; Graham, 2012; Felkins, 2015; Gqola, 2015; Musser, 2016; Slatton, 2017; Boswell 2018). In defiance of this tainted legacy, the three Black women poets under study dare to reclaim Black women's erotic subjectivities and wrest control of their narratives from the clutches of the white gaze and colonial impositions. They write against the notion that Black female sexuality "can only be valued if it is impenetrable—seen but not touched" (Musser, 2016: 153-154). They step boldly from a "politics of silence" surrounding Black female sexuality to a "politics of articulation" (Morgan, 2015: 37). Thompson in Marshall (2011: 81) heralds such a practice, emphasising that for Black women to reclaim their erotic agency from dominant narratives, they should undo the silence through "all forms of representation (literary or otherwise)," or else their "sexuality will always be misperceived and misinterpreted." She posits that in doing so, the Black woman "can inscribe the fullness and complexity of her sexual desires, pleasures and fantasies anew" (Thompson in Marshall, 2011: 81).

The outlined transformative practice aligns well with what Griffin (1996: 521) calls textual healing, which refers to Black women writers' exploration of "female bodies as sites of healing, pleasure, and resistance," and they achieve this by replacing the "dominant discourse's obsession with the visual black body with a perspective that privileges touch and other senses." At this juncture, textual healing promotes sexual healing and vice versa. Boswell (in Xaba, 2018: 87) similarly observes the burgeoning reparative work of Black

women poets, noting that "the growing body of sexuality poetry by Black women is the celebration of female bodies, sex and women's genitalia." This affirms hooks' (2000: 92) staunch belief in the necessity to cultivate an "erotics of being" founded on the fundamental right to freely express sexual desires and to derive from sexual pleasure a "life-affirming" ethos, so as to, in the words of Lorde (1984: 05), "do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society." This ethos is the very heartbeat of the Black women poets under study. They reclaim the Black female body and Black women's erotic agency and simultaneously advocate for greater visibility and acceptance of queer identities in South Africa. In doing so, they shutter the omnipresent white gaze on the Black female body and challenge the entrenched hegemony of heteronormativity.

gantsho's poetry, as my engagement with her work proves, emerges as unreserved, daring, forthright, and impervious to judgment or censure. These qualities manifest vividly in her poem "My Girlfriend Hates Penetration," where the speaker openly narrates:

> My girlfriend hates penetration. Her fingers are always careful not to go deep into me. When I go down on her, I nibble on her clit while rubbing the rim of her vagina with a pink vibrating egg. When she raises her pelvis, I slip it in. I can feel her grip tighten as I try to slip my fingers out. This is the first time I've dared to enter her walls. (gantsho, 2018: 30)

The bare nature of the poem situates its narrative within the realm of a confessional mode akin to diary-like privacy, where the author would unabashedly reflect on their musings and intimate affairs without the shackles of external judgement. Such stylistic nakedness, to me, feels as though I have gained access to the speaker's diary, and I am surreptitiously perusing its contents. As such, distinctions between the private and the public, the personal and the political, blur. This, indeed, constitutes gantsho's giving to the reader.

gantsho's naked narrative can also be seen as a countermeasure against the persistent homophobically-veiled interrogatives such as 'how do you do it?' and analogous inquiries. The bareness of the narrative manifests as a resolute 'there you have it' retort, while its liberated, unconcerned tone assumes a disregard of judgement and a conscious disruption of the normative. Such fugitive consciousness materialises as a fugitive act to "undermine the category of the dominant" (Campt in Sojoyner, 2017: 516). As Abdur–Rahman (2012: 06) elucidates,

> [A] queer subject inhabits social (and sometimes sexual) margins, throwing into crisis and into relief our most precious and pervasive ideations of the normative, along with the ideological, economic, and political apparatuses in which the violences of normativity operate.

Likewise, gantsho's bare narrative emerges as the very embodiment of this "throwing into crisis […] the ideations of the normative" that Abdur–Rahman highlights. In inhabiting the sexual and social peripheries, she endeavours to shake, compromise, and dismantle the conventional paradigms. Her defiance, just like the other two poets under study, Putuma and mupotsa—as I shall soon prove—supports Boswell's (2011: 86) statement that "Black women poets have chosen to write about sexuality in ways that declare: 'we, Black women, are here, often queer; we own our sexuality; we insist on a reckoning of Black women's sexual experience as what counts as public politics'." By and large, the naked nature of gantsho's narrative nullifies the prurient curiosity often engendered by homophobic attitudes towards coital–related experiences of queer people. This consequently effectuates a radical disruption of the hegemonic grip of heteronormativity upon societal consciousness and naturalises queer intimate experiences.

The poem begins tenderly, with the speaker acknowledging her beloved's discomfort with penetration. It then unfolds as a narrative recounting of the moment that the lover, the

speaker, ventured to breach this barrier, as she reveals at the end of the poem, "this is the first time I've dared to enter her walls" (gantsho, 2018:30). It may be reasonable to infer that hereafter, the speaker's beloved became comfortable with penetration, as the speaker reveals near the end, "I can feel her grip tighten as I try to slip my fingers out" (gantsho, 2018: 30). This experience can then be considered a pivotal point in their intimacy. Throughout the poem, there is deliberate use of overtly sexual speech and explicit imagery. The pictorial vividness achieved by the words "nibble," "clit," "rubbing," "rim," "vagina," "pink vibrating egg," which is a vibrator, "slip," "tighten," and "fingers," renders the narrative unyielding and audacious, and subsequently serves as a defiant assertion of the validity and normalcy of queer desire and intimacy. Concurrently, the speaker's tender ministrations—nibbling of the beloved's clit, the rubbing of the beloved's vaginal rim, the slipping in of the "pink vibrating egg" in the beloved's vagina—materialise as sensuous and erotically charged gestures that not only affirm the beloved's body but also generate mutual pleasure for the couple.

gantsho's unapologetic portrayal of these sexual acts serve as a Black queer fugitive manoeuvre to "effect agency and joy in spite of (and […] unconcerned with) the risks of surveillance, persecution, or worse" (Haferd and Hackett, 2023: 125). Moreover, this deeply sensual lovemaking places the Black female body as a site for pleasure, as a desirable body to express desires on, as lovable, as touchable. The Black female genitalia—the vagina and the clitoris—are liberated from colonial and patriarchal gazes and are used as sources of pleasure for the Black woman. Boswell (2018: 88) understands this fugitive manoeuvre as a poetics that "calls into being a future in which queer love is celebrated as an outcome of loving and reclaiming Black female genitalia, and by extension, Black female subjectivity." Indeed, the Black woman's body is returned to the Black woman, for her own use, for her own pleasures, and as a site for her to wield agency and to exercise her desires. These are principles that also resonate with Putuma and mupotsa.

Putuma and mupotsa, just like gantsho, portray the fervent nature of Black women's queer intimacy. Putuma's speaker, for example, in her poem "Coming Home," avidly reminisces:

> We made love like we were being chased by wolves,
>
> Like the wolves were on your desk with us,
>
> Like the wolves were in our hands,
>
> Circling around our clits
>
> And dripping down our legs.
>
> Like the wolves were in our mouths,
>
> Devouring all flesh and bone. (Putuma, 2017: 40)

Here, readers are exposed to the consuming hunger, the wolfish passion, that the speaker and her beloved have for each other. Putuma's comparison of the two lovers to wolves or wolfish behaviour confuses the demarcation between human and animal, peril and pleasure. This deliberate fusion undoubtedly arises from Putuma's penchant for subversive resistance. As I have noted earlier on, historical narratives are rife with colonial constructs that depict Black women as savage, innately animalistic, and hypersexual, among other derogatory tropes (see Marshall, 2011; Gqola, 2015; Slatton, 2018; Bharj, Biernat, and Mosley, 2023). Thus, Putuma's portrayal of the two lovers as embodying such stereotypes may, at a cursory glance, be construed as reinforcing these tropes. However, as we are now familiar with Putuma's language of subversion—as expounded upon in the preceding chapter—the portrayal remains only at two junctures: as a rhetoric of subversion and as a reclamation of the Black female body. It arises as a discursive intervention for the Black woman not to have to 'fix' but to be, as a right for her to exist without the imposition of corrective measures.

Across tumultuous sweeps of history, Black women have borne, and continue to bear, the onus of having to reshape their sexuality/ies and comportments to align with the ideal femininity perpetuated by white heteropatriarchy. Howbeit, such strictures find no purchase in the work of Putuma nor in the collections of the other two Black women poets under study, gantsho and mupotsa. They unequivocally reject such burdens. In essence, their discursive strategies in reclaiming the Black female body echo Hélène Cixous' (cited in Moïse, 2018: 143) argument that

> [b]y writing herself, woman returns to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display – the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard.

They reclaim the Black female body and sexuality, unconcerned with the politics of respectability or the confines of the politics of disrespectability. Their work beckons the reader to consume or observe, whether in approval or disapproval, matters not. Their work is an assertion of their presence, a refusal to be defined, a refusal to be circumscribed, a refusal to be that which must be for the sake of its being. This is their Black feminist fugitive course.

Returning to Putuma's poem, the two lovers find themselves in a consumptive embrace, devouring each other, "flesh and bone" alike. Their voracious appetite for one another echoes the deep hunger articulated by mupotsa's speaker in her poem "Fruit Bowl," who expresses to her beloved: "I want to climb you / like my friend Pumla rides / a fruit bowl / munching apples / like the deep hunger / inside her / will never cease / to need" (mupotsa, 2018: 28). Similar to this speaker's voracious appetite for her beloved, the two lovers in Putuma's "Coming home," share this deep feeling of hunger, of devouring, of munching on one another. The intense, passionate, hurried nature of their lovemaking is accentuated by the

portrayal of them as being pursued by wolves; as if under the vigilant gaze or rule of wolves; as if their hands possess a primal, wolf-like quality in their swiftness; as if their mouths, as their voracious nature makes them, were of wolves. They consume each other as though the "deep hunger inside [them] will never cease to need," as mupotsa would put it.

Putuma's portrayal of the two lovers embodying wolfish behaviour serves as a rhetoric of subversion to colonial narratives that constructed the image of Black women as unfeminine. Beckels (cited in Moïse, 2018: 142) reminds us that the "the black woman was ideologically constructed as essentially 'non-feminine' in so far as primacy was placed upon her alleged muscular capabilities, physical strength, aggressive carriage, and sturdiness." Thus, by aligning the two lovers with the characteristics of apex predators like wolves, Putuma subversively complicates the animalistic and non-feminine constructs of Black women perpetuated by colonial ideologies. This subversive resistance embedded in sexual pleasure and desire constitutes a Black queer woman gesture to complicate colonial narratives that have relegated Black bodies outside the Western category of the human (Szaniawska 2019: 39).

In fact, Putuma also undermines the colonial imposition of the Jezebel archetype onto Black women for their assumed lascivious nature; instead, she comes audaciously embodying a wolfish spirit. It is this wolfish spirit that warrants the "dripping down" on the lovers' legs as they circle each other's clits. This serves not only to subvert colonial constructions of Black women but also to challenge heteronormative notions of pleasure. Overall, Putuma is not interested in 'purifying' the 'animalistic,' 'licentious,' 'non-feminine' Black woman to conform to white standards; rather, she asserts the right for her to exist, to experience joy and pleasure on her terms. Her flight is one initiated "by (un)successful attempts to contain or circumscribe the black femme within existing epistemological categories" (Keeling in Szaniawska, 2019: 42). It is an assertion of Black queer women's presence, one from colonial

constraints to self-definition. The same could be said about mupotsa in her poem "On Death and Pleasure."

mupotsa in her poem "On Death and Pleasure" employs a bare narrative akin to that of gantsho in her poem "My Girlfriend Hates Penetration," albeit mupotsa's is in the third-person point of view. Just like the other two poets, gantsho and Putuma, mupotsa ventures to normalise and validate queer intimacies. The speaker recounts, "she would lean into her / from behind / pressing her arms and hands and face against her, / pressing her tongue / rolling it in circles /and pushing inside her" (mupotsa, 2018: 26). mupotsa's bare narrative, similar to gantsho's in "My Girlfriend Hates Penetration," serves as a tacit rebuttal to latent homophobic inquiries regarding queer coital experiences. Her narrative is also just as replete with sexual imagery. The erotic bodily performances of "leaning," "pressing," "rolling," and "pushing" harbour the potential to counter prevailing narratives that seek to regulate expressions of Blackness, sexuality, and gender (Szaniawska, 2019: 37).

The three Black women poets convey the Black queer woman as a subject with her desires and pleasures to pursue and enact, unfettered by the constraints imposed by racist, heteronormative, religious, and cultural paradigms. Such, as Ellison (2019: 08) would formulate it, is a "Black femme flight, or the re/appearance of queer femininity" that complicates the normative order, and it comes consisting of "visions of the forbidden, the hidden, the foreclosed" (Baderoon in Xaba, 2018: 08). In the poem, the Black queer woman is given a space in which to exist and enact agency. She becomes a celestial escapee, soaring away from the asphyxiating tendrils of dominant power structures while also being within them because another place does not yet exist. Indeed, through these three Black women's poetry, "the black female body claims its right to exist and survive as the poetic voice seeks to recreate the body beyond historical trauma and prejudice" (Moïse, 2018: 142). The Black

female body is rendered alive and active, touching and touchable, and loving and lovable. It pulsates with agency, luxuriates in pleasure, and pursues its desires.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I read gantsho's collection, *red cotton* (2018), as a poetic outpouring, a poetics of expression poised to quiver, disrupt, and dismantle conventional paradigms. Influenced by Alexis Pauline Gumbs' work, I posit that gantsho's poetics of expression embodies a profound spillage, with the reader as the fortunate recipient. In my engagement with gantsho's overflowing narrative, I employ Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality and Moten's (2003) concept of fugitivity to scrutinise how Black women and Black queer women, as depicted in the text, navigate the interlocking systems of power, with particular attention to the pernicious forces of patriarchal violence, the pervasive white gaze, and the hegemony of heteronormativity. With this consciousness, I attend to Brooks' (2020) concept of fugitive listening and Strauss' (2022) ethos of resonant feminist listening to underscore fugitive feminist manifestations and manoeuvres embedded in the text. A palpable leitmotif of escape emerges from gantsho's collection, underpinned by an imagining of the dialectics of fight and flight as tools to navigate oppressive structures. I further discern a desire for escape embodied by the three poets—gantsho, Putuma, and mupotsa—from colonial and homophobic strictures as shown in their adamant spirit to disrupt the status quo, reclaim the Black female body, and celebrate Black queer women experiences. My theory is that such a determination finds fruition through the embodiment of the symbiotic energy of resistance and resilience. I posit that the embodiment of this symbiotic energy makes a traversable route towards liberation.

Chapter 4: On Feeling: Black Feminist Eropoetics of love and loss in mupotsa's *feeling and ugly (2018)*

> It was not that I was finding febrile coordinates in the world. I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other…and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared.
>
> —Christina Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes* (2023)

mupotsa's *feeling and ugly* centres itself on feeling. It traverses the multivalent terrains of love: its need, its fulfilling presence, its tender, sometimes chaotic presence, the jagged spaces it carves when absent, the asphyxiating weight that comes with losing it. Love, in the collection, is neither idealised nor romanticised; it is messy and imperfect. And mupotsa, here, situates the Black female body as a site where these feelings—the imperfect-perfect love and loving—are felt and embodied. In the text, the Black female body, feeling and vulnerable, occupies space fully, even if its stay is fleeting. The impermanence of the stay does not undermine the permanence of the feeling; the feeling remains bound to the body that feels.

Attuned to the principle of 'escapology' within the framework of fugitivity, I read mupotsa's eropoetics—a term I use to underscore how her poetics are squarely intertwined with the erotic—as integral to the embodied praxis of fugitivity. If, as Harney and Moten (2013: 49) argue, Blackness means to "render unanswerable the question of how to govern the thing that loses and finds itself to be what it is not," then fugitivity is the ethical stance that makes the thing, Blackness, ungovernable. It is the practice of perpetual flight, a refusal of the symbolic violence that seeks to define Black existence as the "non-human Other from which whiteness and humanity draw their meaning and purpose" (Emejulu in Anucha, 2023: 237). In light of

this, then, fugitivity becomes not only an act of escape but a generative practice of repair that allows “injured communities to make themselves whole and create terms of living beyond the injuries experienced” (Lewis, 2023: 1392). As a reparative framework, fugitivity opens the possibility for a mode of existence that refuses the imposed wounds of colonial and racial structures, while simultaneously imagining new forms of freedom and self-determination (Lewis, 2023: 1396). I thus use it in the chapter as a guiding analytic tool to ascertain how mupotsa’s eropoetics is a form of reparative work—a sensuous and affective intervention that centres on the feeling Black female body, one that allows the Black female body to govern itself, to feel, to heal as it finds itself, in ways that trouble colonial and societal impositions.

In Spillers’ (1984: 74) words, Black women are “the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb.” Spillers uses this metaphor to reflect the silencing and contorting of Black women’s sexualities by oppressive structures. Indeed, as I explained in the previous chapter, colonial powers propagated the stereotypes of Black women as hypersexual, animalistic and prone to prostitution; in response to this, Black women adopted a politics of silence and created sexual scripts that reflected a politics of respectability (Nanda, 2019: 02), hence they remained “unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb,” to go back to Spillers (1984). To redress this invisibility, Black feminist theorists advanced a politics of articulation that “builds on the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to speak and act; to theorize difference as agency, as a way of knowing, and power” (Castro-Borrego, 2016: 90-91). It is within this theoretical scaffolding that I seek to excavate mupotsa’s eropoetics as a reparative work that attends and speaks to Black women's feelings in ways that render the Black female body as agentic, a feeling body with its feeling appetites to feed. Parlow (cited in Sobande and Emejulu, 2022: 237) affirms this inquiry, noting that it puts to the fore the “countless and varied ways in which Black women engage in less visible, yet no less significant change-making efforts.”

I begin the chapter by mapping the contours of the feeling Black female body that are present in mupotsa's collection through Audre Lorde's (1984) notion of the erotic, supplemented by Sara Ahmed's (2014) concept of sticky affect, to unearth the erotic and affective bursts that permeate the anthology. The erotic, as explained by Lorde (1984:53), is a "measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings." In and of itself, the erotic works to cultivate "life's wayward energies," as Shulman (2020: 31) would put it.

Ahmed's (2014) concept of "sticky" affect describes the way objects become affectively bound to one another within a relational and intersubjective framework. Stickiness, for Ahmed (2014: 91), is about "what objects do to other objects – it involves a transference of affect." She further elaborates that this process is a form of relational "doing," where distinctions between active and passive are blurred—one object's stickiness may precede another's, making it appear as though the latter clings to it (Ahmed, 2014: 91). Ahmed's (2014) affect, therefore, produces a framework of affect that sticks with us, even before the "stickiness of the other" and even after we have been cut off from the sticky object, because feelings may "stick to some objects, and slide over others" (Ahmed, 2014: 08).

That said, the combination of Lorde's (1984) erotic with Ahmed's (2014) sticky affect allows for a framework that tracks the erotic, affective and embodied experiences of the feeling Black female body in mupotsa's anthology. In this chapter, I analyse how mupotsa's eropoetics oscillates between the realms of love and its loss. I start the analysis with a focus on the erotic, examining how the cultivation and celebration of the erotic materialise in the body. This simultaneously provides a conduit for examining how erotic affects stick, get unstuck, remain stuck.

Remaining attentive to the feeling Black female body, the second part of the analysis attends to the sticky affects that materialise from the experiences of unrequited love and infidelity. I

look at how mupotsa compels readers to make space for the troubled feeling*ness* of the Black female body, its ‘feeling and ugly,’ as mupotsa terms it, so as to cultivate avenues of expression and repair. I then turn to mupotsa’s portrayal of the embodied emotional intensities that come with the experience of abortion, reading it alongside gantsho and Putuma’s works. The chapter’s overall goal is to present the erotic and sticky affect—approached through the lens of fugitive repair—as frameworks through which to understand and acknowledge the feeling Black female body’s desires, somaticised affect and vulnerabilities.

4.1 Eropoetics of tongue, touch and breath

Aligning with Griffin’s (1996: 521) observation of Black women writers’ privileging of touch and other senses in reclaiming the Black female body, mupotsa’s anthology is saturated with erotic and affective sensualities that foreground the tongue, touch and breath as central to embodied expression. These leitmotifs—tongue, touch and breath—animate the Black female body as an agentic, expressive and feeling entity, consequently subverting colonial narratives that seek and have sought to circumscribe and silence it. Attentive to the destructive legacy of colonial influence on the Black female body, Muholi (cited in Strauss, 2022: 43) incisively notes that Black women were never granted the space to explore their sexual and erotic desires. This “affective excision,” as Strauss (2022) calls it, muted Black women’s embodied and emotional histories, particularly those tied to pleasure and (erotic) desire, both in public and private spaces. It is against this backdrop that Morgan (2015: 38) insists that we must read Black women’s cultural production for pleasure; otherwise, “we will continue to inextricably link trauma and violence to Black women’s lived and historical experiences and negate pleasure as frivolous, irrelevant, or ‘unfeminist.’” mupotsa’s collection grants a vocabulary that embraces the embodied and affective lives of Black women in ways that subvert the colonial residues inscribed on the Black female body.

The leitmotif of the tongue, insofar as the open expressiveness of mupotsa's anthology is concerned, is made a gateway to the formation of romantic relationships, wherein the absence of its proper use compromises the possibility of love. In other words, the tongue is made a prerequisite in forming romantic relationships. In her haiku poem "I Won't Take a Lover," for example, mupotsa's speaker staunchly avows: "I won't take a lover / who does not know what it means / to use their tongue" (mupotsa, 2018: 44). Here, readers are prompted to interpret the mentioned use of the tongue both literally and figuratively. On the literal front, the tongue connotes physical intimacy, while figuratively, it extends to the power of verbal expression. Concurrently, the phrasing "what it means" highlights the necessity for the beloved to understand the importance of verbal communication, whether it be romantic whispers or beyond, and in its literal sense, it extends to encompass the importance of recognising the significance of tongue use in lovemaking.

The phrase "what it means" is central here: one would be justified to posit that mupotsa could have opted for the general 'how to' instead of "what it means." This shows that the speaker is less concerned with mechanical proficiency (how to) and more with the beloved's comprehension of the tongue usage's deeper significance (what it means), both in intimacy and verbal expression. At the heart of this demand is the speaker's belief that romantic fulfilment cannot be separated from communication. This simultaneously confronts the politics surrounding Black women's sexualities and sexual expression. As Leath, Jerald, Perkins and Jones (2021: 05) also contend, Black women have long been hopping between the intersections of "the Jezebel stereotype, respectability politics, and sexual double standards […] that encourage them to limit their sexual expression." mupotsa's speaker could thus be seen as refusing this policing and silencing, echoing Simpson's (2013: 74) assertion that "Black experiences are incomplete without full articulation of our embodied, erotic selves." She demands a love that recognises her erotic freedom, her voice.

Going with the figurative interpretation of the poem, it becomes resplendently evident in the poem "The Subject of I," considering its cryptic nature, how mupotsa's speaker(s) values the essence of expression over the mechanics. The speaker inscrutably laments: "I long for pleasure that comes with tongue and skin and eyes that touch and love on bottom and love on top softness and hardness and eyes" (mupotsa, 2018: 50). As is, the line lacks syntactical clarity or logical coherence; it does, nevertheless, convey a discernible message—although haphazardly. The polysyndetic nature of the line, marked by the repeated conjunction "and," creates a cumulative effect that represents a rapid stream of consciousness on the speaker's part. This consequently reveals the speaker's spontaneous flow of thoughts as well as the intensity of her erotic desires, such that the need for clear articulation is suspended.

One might reasonably infer that mupotsa's choice to use such cryptic language here also works to subvert the misnaming of the erotic by men. As Lorde (1984: 54) avers, "the erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation." mupotsa's apparent alignment with this in the poem seems less an endorsement of the stereotype than a legitimisation, acceptance and validation of such feelings and expressions. Following Lorde (1984), Benton (2020: 26) is supportive of the act of validating of erotic feelings, arguing that "as agents of erotic feeling we are often compelled to 'look away' from or misname these feelings in order to convey rational knowledge." It thus makes sense that the speaker is less concerned about deducible articulation than articulation itself. In her autonomy of affect, she follows her own words for her own use.

In the subsequent lines, the speaker blatantly lays bare her erotic desires: "I just want to eat your face, your whole face and arms; consume you entirely for a moment suspended in the lies of affirmation" (mupotsa, 2018: 50). Here, the language, while abstruse, reveals the speaker's impassioned obsession with her beloved. The succession of things to be

consumed—the face, the whole face, the arms, and the beloved's entirety—speaks to the escalating obsession that consumes the speaker. It is almost as though each desire leads to another, all ensnaring the speaker in a whirlwind of consuming passion. Castro-Borrego (2016: 91) understands this motif of consuming passion in Black women liberatory discourses well, asserting that Black women's liberatory discourses are made possible through Black women's right understanding of their erotic desires. And the speaker in the poem fittingly embodies this. It could also be contended here that while mupotsa's portrayal of the female body as something edible or to be consumed resonates with patriarchal tropes, it also unsettles and subverts them. The male objectification of the female body through food metaphors is a persistent motif in patriarchal discourses (see for instance Ncube, 2024). mupotsa appropriates and reclaims the metaphor to reframe the 'consumable body' not as a site of objectification or exploitation but as one of intimacy and the erotic. In mupotsa's depiction, the focus shifts from objectification to an articulation of longing, an affirmation of the complexities of the erotic.

The speaker's erotic burst is also emblematic of Lorde's (1984: 53) contention that the erotic rests "in the deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed and unrecognised feelings." It is no surprise then that mupotsa dedicates the poem to her "shrieking spirits who sing through [her] spirit and breathe through [her] stomach" (mupotsa, 2018: 50). In other words, the usually "unexpressed and unrecognised feelings" highlighted by Lorde (1984) are the "shrieking spirits" that mupotsa recognises and gives space for expression in the poem. They come out as they are—in their speedy, convoluted nature—in a language that resists immediate comprehension.

As readily discernible, mupotsa, in the poem, challengingly blurs the line between the erotic and the spiritual. The erotic enlivens the spiritual, and vice versa, as evidenced by the said 'shrieking spirits' igniting the speaker's erotic desires and, in turn, are summoned and/or fed

by the expressed erotic desires. Another illustration of this is in her poem "For Witch, Wizard, Sage," where the speaker confides: "my beloved, / who breathes smoke / into the parts of me / where my ancestors dream / that I might find them" (mupotsa, 2018: 51). Here, the beloved's act of breathing—I will elaborate on the leitmotif of breath shortly—to the speaker cultivates means of existing outside of the physical for the speaker, where she could meet her ancestors. For the speaker, the act of breath-sharing weaves the physical with the spiritual. At this juncture, the barrier between the erotic and the spiritual, the physical and the metaphysical blurs. This fusion supports Lorde's (1984: 56) warning against separating the spiritual from the erotic, cautioning that doing so reduces the spiritual to "a world of flattened affect." It is no doubt thus, through the celebration of the erotic, that the spirits outlined by the speaker in the poem remain shrieking. Weir-Soley (cited in Castro-Borrego, 2016:91) views this merger between the sexual and the spiritual as "a political act, an act of recovery that can potentially restore the black woman's sense of wholeness." This also simultaneously mirrors Lorde's (1984: 55) contention of the erotic as

> an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now claiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.

For the speaker, her "assertion of lifeforce," as deployed by Lorde (1984), is made possible by her erotic urgency. This erotic urgency animates modes of living for the speaker that may not have been possible had her erotic power, "the shrieking spirits," been suppressed.

The leitmotif of breath in mupotsa's collection manifests as a "sticky" (Ahmed, 2014) site of affective circulation, one that makes the speaker oscillate between repair and despair. Through this motif, readers see how emotions adhere to objects—in this case, breath—not necessarily in coherence, because "to adhere is not always to cohere" (Ahmed, 2014: 98).

"Trigger Warning" is one poem that thoroughly portrays this affective "stickiness," and it is necessary that I quote it at length. The speaker narrates:

> breathing
>
> together like this
>
> fills me with power.
>
> breathing
>
> together like this
>
> fills me with pride.
>
> breathing
>
> together like this
>
> hurts.
>
> we breathe out of
>
> the wound,
>
> feels like breaking
>
> into speech
>
> into pieces.
>
> breathing
>
> together like this
>
> fills me to pieces. (mupotsa, 2018: 56)

In the poem, breath functions as an adhesive affective agent that sticks the speaker to her relational other, her beloved. The poem moves from an optimistic tone in lines 1–6 to a sorrowful one in lines 7–17, revealing the complex nature of the emotions that emerge from

this sticky contact. The anaphora "breathing / together like this" with the refrain "fills me" show the speaker's contemplative and introspective mood. As we can see from the poem, this sharing of breath initially engenders a sense of power and pride from the speaker, and subsequently progresses to feelings of pain and fragmentation, as revealed in lines 2, 5, 9 and 17, respectively. Moreover, the initial regularity in the structure in lines 1–8 attests to the empowerment and pride derived from the act of shared breathing; this affective cohesion gets disrupted in lines 9–14, reflecting an intrusion of pain amplified by the abrupt shift from the refrain "fills me with" to simply "hurts." In other words, this act of affective breath-sharing accumulates an "affective value," as Ahmed (2014) would have it, that renders the act as much of an animating force as it is a debilitating one. The poem's irregular lineation, therefore, could be interpreted as emblematic of the speaker's emotional disintegration that makes her oscillate between feelings of empowerment and pain, repair and despair.

Just like her manipulation of form, mupotsa's deft manipulation of sound is worth recognising here, as it works to accentuate the poem's emotional terrains. The use of slant rhyme in the words "breathing" and "breaking" adds a layer of sonic complexity, which works to highlight how this act of shared breathing manifests as both a unifying and fragmenting force. This shows how the two lovers, in their sticky relationality, are "saturated with affect" (Ahmed, 2014: 11) that allows the "body to affect and be affected" (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 02). Concomitantly, the word "fills" in "fills me with pride" and "fills me with power" is echoed in "fills me to pieces," with the shift from positive to negative connotations. Here, the word "fills" materialises as a "sticky sign" (Ahmed, 2014), that through repetition, the speaker's emotions adhere to incoherently. Similarly, the use of homophonic words "fills" and "feels", as well as the repetition of "into" and "pieces", reveal the multilayered emotions of the speaker while also creating a phonetic echo that accentuates the poem's sonic cohesion. On the other hand, the oxymoron in the final line "fills me to

pieces," encapsulates the paradoxical duality of this breath-sharing act, its capacity to both empower and debilitate. This sticky accumulation of affect mirrors the view of Figlerowicz (2017: 46) that an "affective experience leads one into a perpetually surprising process of self-discovery; there is no telling what one's body might come to express or respond to." Much like a balloon inflated to the point of bursting, the speaker is filled to the point of breaking into pieces.

The leitmotif of touch in mupotsa's poems emerges as the ne plus ultra mode of sensual pleasure in establishing and sustaining affective attachments, and like the leitmotif of breath, mupotsa uses it as a site where affective intensities are circulated and accumulated through the relational contact between bodies. The poem "I am a Holder of Faces" reflects this with glaring clarity. The speaker articulates: "making love / means / sharing breath / means / rubbing bodies / means / wetness and smelling" (mupotsa, 2018: 10). Here, once again, the act of breath-sharing surfaces as one of the key elements necessary for intimate connections. Clearly, for mupotsa, as this section proves, love and lovemaking cannot be without the three components: communication, breath-sharing and touch. All her love poems swell with this materiality. The established requisites manifest as by-products of the erotic. As evinced by Jordan-Zachery (2022: 05), "through the use of our erotic, we can engage in self-articulation and self-actualization." In addition to the established desideratum of only taking a lover who knows what it means to use their tongue, as seen in her haiku "I Won't Take a Lover," the quoted stanza reveals other essential requisites needed by mupotsa's speaker(s) in maintaining a romantic relationship.

For the speaker, as we see in the poem, lovemaking includes, on top of touch and sharing breath, "wetness and smelling" (mupotsa, 2018: 10). The stickiness here, the binding of bodies to effectuate "wetness and smelling" underscores the affective intensities that envelop the lovers in a way that eludes aseptic associations to invoke disgust—as per the imports of

“wetness” and “smelling.” Denotatively speaking, mupotsa’s erotic embracement here, as throughout the collection, works not only to trouble colonial and societal impositions on the Black female body, or what Melancon (2014) calls the “classical Black female script,” but also to reclaim the Black female body back to the Black woman, to affirm it as a site of desire, agency and affective power. As Bey (2018: 106) posits, “refusal is where it’s at.” Refusal is the very insignia of Black feminism.

The image crafted by mupotsa in the poem is one of unrestrained pleasure, where the body and its senses are fully engaged in the process of loving and/or lovemaking. This dynamic is also palpable in the poem “When Eyes to Eyes.” The speaker reminisces:

> we would kiss
>
> and hold
>
> and strangle, gently
>
> […]
>
> And in the morning,
>
> I would notice all the marks on her skin
>
> place my fingers against each one
>
> […]
>
> it was like this for many days
>
> love
>
> bites
>
> and drowning (mupotsa, 2018: 45)

Immediately, the title of the poem plunges readers into a scene brimming with erotic passion. The first stanza of the quoted part paints the reader a picture of the speaker and her inamorata in a sensual embrace, in their stickiness. Stickiness, as Ahmed (2014: 91) explains it, is a form of "withness" where the "elements that are 'with' get bound together." This makes the tactile sensations of "kiss," "hold," "strangle," "gently," "marks," "fingers," "love," "bites" and "drowning" affective energies that circulate the affective environment of this "withness." In this space, the speaker is an "affective object which is both made sticky by and given the power to make sticky that which she affects" (Roberts, 2023: 1966). Additionally, the affective energies that circulate in this affective environment are tinged with aggressiveness, as shown by the words "drowning" and "bites," reflecting the erotic intensity of the couple's lovemaking. Important to also note in the poem is the use of past tense and the speaker's reminiscent tone, which raises the question of whether the relationship withstood the test of time or if it has dissolved into memory.

mupotsa assumes the same reminiscing pose, albeit with a touch of vulnerability, in the poem "I'd Run My Fingers Across Your Back," where the speaker laments: "I'd run my fingers across your back / connecting dots, / playing gently against your skin / […] / begging you / to love me" (mupotsa, 2018: 18). Even though the tone and message of this poem are like the ones of the poem "When Eyes to Eyes," in this poem, readers get a conclusive answer that the feelings may have not been mutual for the two lovers or that the speaker's love may not have been reciprocated, as she begs her beloved to love her. The speaker's ongoing affective attachment, despite the lack of reciprocation, goes to show the way affective investments continue to stick even in the face of rejection. If Berlant (2012: 06) knows of love as "the embracing dream in which desire is reciprocated," then mupotsa's speaker teaches us otherwise here.

It seems, for the speaker, an ongoing investment in a relationship, even in the absence of reciprocation, keeps the hope that the love may come alive. Ahmed (2014: 131) helps me to communicate my point better when she clarifies that "if love functions as the promise of return, then the extension of investment through the failure of return works to maintain the ideal through its deferral into the future." This, to me, seems to be the belief the speaker holds. The speaker's act of connecting dots across her beloved's back adds to this, suggesting a yearning to find coherence in an otherwise fragmented relationship. All in all, the stickiness of this unrequited love binds the speaker to a lover who, in refusing to return her feelings, leaves her entangled in an affective loop that prevents her from seeing that the love she has given might not be returned (Ahmed, 2014: 131). Although mupotsa does not provide an easy, much less, conclusive answer to the question of whether this love relationship eventually ended, the fact that it continues to haunt the speaker is clear, as we see through its overpowering yet vestigial presence in the collection.

Assuming it is one speaker, the dedication to making this love as alive as possible is palpable in mupotsa's poem "I Don't Think I Will Ever Stop Writing Poems," where the speaker expresses: "I will write poems like I'm hoping you'll notice / I will write poems about holding your parts and your wholes / I will dream of the touch between us" (mupotsa, 2018: 52). If we choose to read the poem "When Eyes to Eyes" as having the same speaker as this one, the speaker indeed remains hopeful that her love might be reciprocated, as she expresses in line 2, "I will write poems like I'm hoping you'll notice." This line also suggests that the relationship may have eventually ended, and now all the affective traces only remain in the speaker's memory, because sticky affects persist beyond the moment of contact (Ahmed, 2014). The act of writing about the beloved then operates as the binding agent to keep the lover stuck to the speaker. As readily noticeable, the leitmotif of touch resurfaces here. The line "I will write poems about holding your parts and your whole," directly mirrors the

consuming passion of the speaker highlighted in the poem "The Subject of I" where the speaker bemoans: "I just want to eat your face, your whole face and arms" (mupotsa, 2018: 50). This imagery underscores an erotic intensity characterised by the urge to collapse the boundaries between the self and the other; it is "an eroticism that wants to simultaneously erase and reconstruct borders between [the self] and the body of the other" (Bornemark in Roberts, 2022: 1971). Concurrently, Ghisyawan (2016: 29) notes that "love is possibility. It is wanting to be –to be more, to be together, to be with, to be full and whole, to be part of something." Likewise, for the speaker, to be in love is to be in oneness, a oneness that makes the other the "subject" of her.

In sum, at the core of mupotsa's eropoetics is the recuperation of the Black female body as a feeling, agentic entity—an insurgent force that troubles, among other colonial impositions on the Black female body, stereotypes of Black women as emotional, hyperbolic and unrestrained (see Nash, 2012). This refusal, embedded in repairing the Black female body from its injustices, calls for Black women to strive for "radical Black female sexual subjectivities that are just right for them" (Stalling in Nash, 2012: 513). In this refusal, is a movement to "breach the bounds of this body that has been made without our consent" (Bey, 2019: 55). This reclamation of the Black female body is the very act of finding the "shape of subjectivity in the shake of subjectivity" (Bey, 2019: 61).

4.2 Feeling ugly and sticky

mupotsa's anthology is ripe with erotically and affectively charged forms of love and loving, but it defies a purely utopian conception of love. My engagement with mupotsa's stickiness of an affirmed erotic prevents me from overlooking the stickiness of a flattened erotic that is also present in her anthology. It is worth noting here, before I proceed any further, that I do not in any way claim that relationship difficulties arise solely in the absence of a deeply embraced or celebrated erotic; rather, I argue that the liberatory potential of a celebrated

erotic becomes constrained when overshadowed by a flattened erotic. This is also not to say that the erotic is not at all present in the speakers of the poems analysed below, but that its vitality is tempered, especially considering the intense erotic bursts of the speakers in the poems analysed in the preceding section, in the sense that the self remains constrained, conflicted and confined. In this way, mupotsa eschews a wholly utopian world (of love) and instead offers a eutopian one, one that is imperfect but nevertheless habitable, even if temporarily. This is important, as it augments post-Spillersian frameworks of Black female sexuality/ies.

As advocated by Marshall (2011: 08), Black women have to break the "misinterpretation and secrecy that surround our sexuality in theoretical and practical terms." In parallel, mupotsa's depiction of the feeling Black female body places this body as entering and existing in spaces fully feeling, even in ways that challenge our idealised notions of loving and living. This terrain is often left unexplored by scholars of the erotic, affect and Black feminist theory. I contend that it is important to read the feeling Black female body in ways that also expose its troubled feeling, insofar as texts allow us. As noted by Odozor (2022: 245), Black women are "made visible only so as to suggest absence, lacking, or underdevelopment." The onus of Black feminists thus far has been to affirm Black women's presence, sufficiency and development, and they do this, to echo Bennett (2023: 161), by retrieving "from the underside of the underside partial facts about [them]selves and partial visions of missing parts of [their] experience[s]." This ethos, I venture, underpins mupotsa's collection.

While mupotsa's poetry is saturated with an embrace of love and loving, it is, as I intimated in the final parts of the preceding section, enmeshed in the residues of unrequited love. Adding to this unrequited love is the pain that comes with watching the beloved love and being loved by another. In the poem "Jealous," for example, readers witness the speaker's

affective stickiness—an enduring trace of wanting and woundedness—as she watches her ex-beloved being loved by another:

> Watching you touch his hand
>
> Like you grew it in your own stomach
>
> Released it from your mouth
>
> And kissed it
>
> Like you were born to kiss that hand,
>
> Turns me from the inside
>
> Like my body
>
> Might never forget
>
> What it is like to want him. (mupotsa, 2018: 37)

Here, the speaker's emotions ripple with an almost tactile intensity—of the body turning from the inside, as shown in line 6—where the pain of lost love is not merely felt but embodied, carried in the marrow of the self, sticking to the speaker's very being. It is a churning that is both painful and inescapable, turning her outward in a way that intensifies the memory of want, because when sticky things get pulled apart, they leave residues (Esner, 2022: 08). In other words, the residual contamination of their past relationship leaves (the loss of) their relationship etched into the speaker's body—as shown in lines 6–9—making her body a repository of memory, wherein the longing for the ex-beloved is constantly replayed. Indeed, as Esner (2022: 25) observes, "a person does not disappear from one's life once a relationship has ended, they stick around in memories, reminders, in the things they altered in one's life or habits." This is the case with the speaker's sticky hold of her ex-beloved. It is, as Massumi

(2015: 59) would have it, the kind of memory that "coincides with the immediacy of the present."

Moreover, the tactile imagery of the speaker being turned from the inside as well as the unavoidable memory of the ex-beloved speak to a "materiality of remembrance," in the words of Stanley (2002: 06), one that "invokes a material past, a flesh and blood and living and breathing past, a past of physicality as well as emotionality." In like manner, the imagery of the addressee touching the speaker's ex-beloved's hand as though she birthed it herself signifies an irreversible loss on the speaker's part, with the unsettling imagery of the addressee releasing her beloved's hand from her mouth suggesting something expelled, hinting at the idea that this love may have been unfairly or even forcefully taken away from the speaker. Love, indeed, as Arina Pismenny and Jesse Prinz (2017:2) note, has both the possibility of being the highest source of happiness and being the highest source of pain that "brings one down into the deepest void of despair." Truly, emotions "show us the time it takes to move, or to move on, is a time that exceeds the time of an individual life" (Ahmed, 2014: 202). They show us our limited control over them. On the whole, mupotsa's lines here emerge as a stickiness, one that endures, saturating the speaker with a desire and longing that refuse to dislodge.

In the poem "Hardcore," mupotsa constructs infidelity as an adhesive that binds relationships with adverse complications. The speaker in the poem is a mistress of the addressee's husband, taunting the addressee, the wife:

> I am hardcore like
>
> Sex in the backseat of your husband's car
>
> While you are picking our kids up from school.
>
> And I don't feel bad out it.

And I will deny it until the day I die. (mupotsa, 2018: 16)

The tone of the poem is laced with torment and mockery, aimed at the oblivious wife. Here, the comparison of the speaker's hardcoreness with sex initially invites ambiguity but it becomes clear in the third line that it is used as a weapon of contempt against the beloved's wife. The simile unfolds in two layers. On one side, it reveals the speaker's determination to stay in the illicit affair, fully conscious of its ethical trespass. On the other, it hints at the intensity of their lovemaking.

The provocative specificity of line 3—"while you are picking our kids up from school" (mupotsa, 2018: 16)—is quite intriguing. From the line, readers may be apt to infer that the husband and the mistress share a past that has been surreptitiously rekindled and that they have children from their past relationship, leaving the wife unwittingly entangled in this shared history. In a sense, the stickiness of the speaker and her ex-beloved's past relationship, through its residues, re-adheres in the present, provoking a messiness that also glues the wife to their entanglement. This is so because sticky objects, given their magnetic nature (Bowring, 2019: 33) are inevitably inclined to "pick up other objects" (Ahmed, 2014: 91). The same could be extrapolated about the husband's eventual return to his ex-beloved, the current mistress. In this way, he is the sticky object that glues both the wife and the mistress in this affective triad, because "we become sticky, covered in residue, through our contact with stickiness" (Esner, 2022: 26). The final line shows that the wife harbours some suspicions yet remains stuck, paralysed by deception, as the speaker attests that she "will deny it until the day [she] dies." The speaker's indifference to this transgression is made apparent in the fourth line, as she confirms not feeling bad about it. Arguably, this indifference to the wife is also mirrored by the husband, insofar as the speaker's freedom is concerned.

This poem can be read alongside “For the Woman Who Had a Baby with the Love of My Life,” as they echo each other due to their linear formation. In this poem, the voice is presumably that of the wife:

> I will love that baby
>
> Like it grew out of my thumb,
>
> And into the world to meet me.
>
>
> I will smile through my heartache
>
> And watch you play your happy. (mupotsa, 2018: 32)

If we choose to read these poems in parallel, one might, surmise that mupotsa’s speakers in the collection do not so much reject infidelity as they tolerate it. From the title, it is clear that the beloved had the child with the woman in question while in a relationship with the lover, the speaker. Yet, the speaker remains stuck to this relationship regardless of the unrequited love she endures, as she confesses in the tercet: “I will stop wishing that I didn’t love him so much / I will learn to pretend / that he did not show me only indifference” (mupotsa, 2018: 32). In reading this poem in tandem with the poem “Hardcore,” we can see how mupotsa’s portrayal of romantic entanglements complicates the moral binaries of infidelity and loyalty, revealing the adhesive residues that bind the wife to the husband’s misdoings. This ultimately shows love as a sticky substance that clings even in the face of rejection. Ahmed (2014: 130) aptly captures this when she observes that “even though love is a demand for reciprocity, it is also an emotion that lives with the failure of that demand often through an intensification of its affect.” It is the kind of stickiness that speaks, to steal from Pinto and Pereyra (2019: 09), to “the inability to reconcile attachments to and desires for that which [one] cannot fully

have, hold, or keep." The speaker even dedicates herself to loving the child regardless of the circumstances, as shown in lines 1–3.

The idea of loving the child like it grew out of her thumb throws a paranomasiac effect that replaces the expected word "womb" with "thumb." This choice could be read as a catachresis or malapropism, reflecting a slip of the tongue or intentional misuse, both of which betray the speaker's underlying disgust and internal conflict. The speaker commits to loving the child as if it was part of her, as if it were hers in some impossible, surreal way. The decision to love the child encapsulates an affective attachment that, despite its anguish, clings to the idea of family and care. Alternatively, the choice to use "thumb" over "womb" could be seen as the speaker's inability to come to terms with her beloved's infidelity—better for her to imagine the child as something conjured from her own flesh, albeit from a place as unlikely as a thumb, than to face the reality of the beloved's infidelity. It is an attempt by the speaker to unstick herself from her beloved's betrayal: by imagining the baby as having grown from her thumb, she creates a personal, almost magical connection to it, one that (possibly) bypasses the betrayal of her beloved. Lines 4–5 of the quoted stanza show that she is also willing to extend this love to the child's mother, choosing to maintain a fragile peace between the two of them. These residual attachments that the speaker finds herself in speak to how stickiness is impossible to fully cleanse. As observed by Parreno (2023:05), stickiness "invades all pores. It advances and touches, rebounds and moves into reverse, filling and emptying." Likewise, the residues of the husband's infidelity cling, stick and ensnare the speaker to "sticky entanglements," to deploy Esnar's (2022) terminology, with the husband, the mistress and the child.

I must make it clear, before I close, that my choice to read mupotsa's exploration of the complicatedness of romantic relationships, particularly those shadowed by infidelity, is not concerned with a prescriptive moral lens. Rather, I am drawn to how the feeling Black female

body manoeuvres through its own tangled emotions. I attempt to make space for an understanding of feelings that unsettle our idealised notions of embodied and emotional justice. Research reveals that those with less structural power, such as Black women, tend to exhibit greater tolerance for relationship behaviours, including infidelity, given the constraints they face in relationships (Weiser, Shrout, Thomas, Edwards and Pickens, 2023: 865). Consequently, Black women have the onus of making sure that the relationship thrives, even at the expense of their own happiness (Johnson and Loscocco, 2015: 152). This is something that mupotsa also evinces in the collection. I thus propose that while it is important that we embrace the agentic, erotic, sensual Black female body, we must also hold space for its troubled feeling*ness*—for its feeling and ugly, as mupotsa evocatively terms it. Herein lies the potential to cultivate new pathways of repair.

4.3 Eropoetics of mourning

In the preceding section, I examined the troubled feelings of the Black female body as it navigates the complexities of romantic relationships. Here, I pivot to analyse how the feeling Black female body contends with loss, the loss of a child through abortion. I read grief as a sticky affect that binds the abortee to the past, to the child and to the self. I situate mupotsa's portrayal of the feeling Black female body in dialogue with gantsho and Putuma's. Runde (2019: 34) observes that abortion is often framed as a "feminine anomaly not to be admitted in the public sphere," or as "the domain of immoral women" unworthy of public empathy and understanding. By addressing this often-stigmatised issue, the three poets are creating affective spaces that attune to this kind of grief, a refusal of its disenfranchisement within dominant affective economies.

Grappling with how we might approach Black maternal grief—grief that exists in registers outside the dominant "affective economies" that shape public empathy— Williams (2016: 26) proposes Black maternal grief as "an affective location and analytic" that absorbs "those

aspects of grief that speak in a different language" (Cheng in Williams, 2016: 26). The telos is to give space for nonnormative forms of grieving and acknowledge the multiplicity of personal, intimate mourning (Williams, 2016: 28). This is the trajectory I attempt to follow here. Poetry here, as I shall hopefully show, occupies the liminal space where mourning and the unspeakable converge, expressing both what is lost and how it is felt. Attentive to the erotic poetics of mourning, Stroebe (2018: 67) admonishes how, while grief may be well documented in scientific studies, it is poets who animate the affective depths of such experiences. Also following this line of thinking is Reed (2017: 24) who notes that erotic poetics of mourning in their "insistence on the chaos of not-yet-organized feelings," is concerned "with the transmission of embodied, or somatic experiences intending something broader and more upsetting than titillation." This is exactly what the three Black women poets are teaching us in their eropoetics of mourning. They concurrently gesture towards possibilities of repair.

mupotsa's poem "For the Baby that I Aborted" captures the adhesiveness of grief following abortion, where the speaker, while having come to terms with the loss, is enveloped by sorrow. The speaker laments:

> I miss you from places that my body cannot forget
>
> I miss you from places my ancestors fail to find me
>
> I mourn you from parts of my existence that only God can touch. (mupotsa, 2018: 15)

From the tercet, readers can see how the stickiness of the speaker's grief draws connections across temporalities and realms: the embodied, the ancestral and the divine. These places—the body, the ancestors and God—emerge as affectively charged nodes where the grief clings. In the opening line, the speaker reveals that the memory of her aborted child remains

imprinted on her body. It is as though the speaker is acknowledging that the pain might someday elude cognitive memory, but it will remain encoded in the very fabric of her being. This echoes Massumi's (2015: 59) idea of embodied memory—"a past that is not in any subjective presentation," but "in its activation." In other words, the memory of the child is a memory lodged in the body itself, beneath language, beneath thought. Moreover, the inability of the speaker's body to not ever forget the child speaks to how "stickiness depends on histories of contact" (Ahmed, 2014: 90). Concomitantly, this contact remains "impressed upon the surface of the object" (Ahmed, 2014: 90). Put differently, the loss remains sticky and imprinted upon the speaker's body.

The subsequent lines in the tercet reveal the speaker's grief as an adhesive that reconfigures her spiritual relational networks. Line 2, for example, shows that the loss severs the speaker's connection with her ancestors, as she laments the way they "fail to find" her. The interpretation that emerges from this, though potentially reductive, is that the severing of ancestral ties is due to the abortion, a rift that implicates cultural and perhaps spiritual ambivalence. It is understandable then that the speaker seeks solace in divine intervention, God, as she mourns from "parts that only God can touch." This is so because stickiness invites the sticking of an object to another (Esner, 2022: 07), and "in the event of being cut off from a sticky object […] an object may remain sticky and 'pick up' other objects (Ahmed, 2014: 91). Sticking to God makes God an affective anchor that has the potential to reconcile the child with the mother and perhaps, by extension, to heal the mother.

Similarly, gantsho in her poem "After Xidu Heshang 'Fictionalising Her'" presents readers with a harrowing experience that culminates in the decision to abort a child. The speaker recounts:

> When she is twenty-one, she is raped by two men. She falls pregnant. Her fear of an ugly child with two violent fathers leads her to a woman in downtown Jo'burg. She replaces her fear with a lie she tells her lovers years later: she's not the kind of woman to be tied down with children. (gantsho, 2018: 53)

It would be plausible to argue that this harrowing narrative is an aftermath of the despicable rape event narrated in the poem "Two Beautiful Men," which I delved into in the preceding chapter. The poem under analysis then shows how the experience of rape left an affective and material residue that shaped the speaker's choices and even identity. The anonymity of the woman, the abortionist, as well as the spatial marker "downtown Jo'burg" reveal the dangerous, shadowed spaces that the speaker must navigate in her attempt to unstick herself from the physical manifestation and the affective impact of her violation. Aware of this desperation and peril that drive women to seek unsafe abortion procedures, Runde (2019: 45) reflects on how these terminations "bring us to consider the liminal space between life and death that abortion creates in a way that more deliberately arranged abortions perhaps do not." The sudden experience of the rape, and the sudden experience of being pregnant, all compel the speaker to take the unsafe option of abortion in downtown Jo'burg. Also implicit in the speaker's decision to abort the child is the absence of parental and/or familial support. It could be that the speaker never spoke about the experience or that there is just no support at all.

The references to "ugly child" and "violent fathers" name the deep-seated aversion that the woman has towards the pregnancy and the overall psychological toll the experience has on her. The lie the woman tells later works as a palliative, an affective shield to manage the sticky residue of her trauma and to avoid scrutiny, judgement and victimisation that might otherwise adhere to her. This, in addition to the fact that the speaker may have never opened up about the experience, echoes Cvetkovich's point (cited in Williams, 2016: 27) that "trauma

can be unspeakable and unrepresentable.” Finlay (2015: 28) explores this matter further, expressing that this “burying of pain can be understood as retroflection: a holding in of unexpressed fears, protest, grief and doubts in order to avoid awareness of psychological discomfort or turmoil.” Children, in the speaker’s world, would be or are sticky signs or signifiers of her traumas, her abortion and her rape experience. They symbolise the unresolved trauma that clings to the speaker, her fear of reawakening the residues of her past.

Putuma also roughly broaches the issue of abortion in the poem “Xmas Dinner with Skeletons.” The speaker interrogates: “how many abortions have fallen out of your mouth / while counting the men in your life” (Putuma, 2017: 96). The question, as it is self-directed, emanates from a place of sticky introspection, where grief, regret and accountability adhere to the speaker. The speaker’s unequivocal act of self-introspection resonates well with Godderis’ (2023: 19) assertion that to heal, “we need self-reflection. We must ask ourselves—and each other—hard questions.” Hooyman, Kramer and Sanders (2021: 53) also observe that, among other things that women go through after abortion, even in instances where initial relief may have been felt, is self-blame. Likewise, the speaker’s introspection is tinged with sticky residues of self-blame and even self-loathing.

Moreover, the imagery of Christmas dinner evoked by the title, traditionally a time for family, sharply contrasts with the presence of skeletons, which manifest as sticky ghostly remnants of lost babies and/or unresolved traumas. This juxtaposition gestures toward the speaker’s isolation, as the familial warmth of the holiday is supplanted with the chilling presence of skeletons. Disenfranchised grief—grief that is neither publicly mourned nor socially supported (Hooyman, Kramer and Sanders 2021: 53)—presents a dilemma: to either suffer in silence or risk social judgment (Meléndez, 2024: 209). The speaker in the poem seems to have succumbed to the former. It is the kind of silence that compels her to isolate with skeletons on Christmas. Runde (2019: 35) seems to comprehend the emotional dilemma of

abortion quite compellingly when she notes that “if abortion retains a certain ‘unspeakability’ that keeps it on the margins of culture, the expression of grief or mourning in its wake remains even more inexpressible.” The speaker’s isolation as well as gantsho’s speaker’s inexpressibility of her experience in the preceding poem mirror this societal reluctance to approach the emotional aftermath of abortion. The sticky affects of their trauma and grief tether them to an isolating silence that shapes their relational and affective worlds. One can read the choice of “mouth” in line 1 as signifying an affective leakage, a slipping out of her abortions while “counting the men in [her] life” (Putuma, 2017: 96), that is, in conversations where she discusses her love life.

Taken together, the three poets—mupotsa, gantsho and Putuma—refuse to shy away from the often complex and agonising realities that come with abortion. They journey into how the experience of abortion is fraught with pain, loss and the struggle for self-reconciliation. They also lay bare the emotional toll that such a decision may inflict on those who must bear it, without caring for imposed cultural scripts and societal norms. In doing so, they destabilise what constitutes the affective economies of abortion. And perhaps to close, I find the three poets’ eropoetics of mourning, or what Godderis (2024) would call feminist grief, resonant with Hélène Cixous’ (cited in Moïse, 2018:146) admonishment that in writing about their bodies, women “must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse.” This ethos cannot be clearer in the works of these three Black women poets. And perhaps the question that Lorde (1986: 61) would ask here is “what do we [then] want from each other after we have told our stories.” adrienne maree brown’s (cited in Godderis 2023: 20) percipience comes in strongly here: “we will be accountable, rigorous in our accountability, all of us unlearning […] We [will] all do our work. Be accountable and go heal, simultaneously, continuously.” This, to me, insofar as my engagement with the three

collections under study is concerned, captures the very heartbeat, the very warp and weft of the works of Koleka Putuma, vangile gantsho and danai mupotsa.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I read mupotsa's work as an eropoetics that animates the Black female body as a feeling entity, alive with desire, yearning and pain. I approach mupotas's (2018) eropoetics using Lorde's (1984) concept of the erotic and Ahmed's (2014) "sticky" affect, with the framework of fugitive repair as a guiding analytic tool. My reading of mupotsa's eropoetics rests on the notion that the affective registers—the sticky, erotic energies that pervade the anthology—empower, shape and unsettle the feeling Black female body as it navigates through the complexities of romantic relationships. I first delve deeply into the "sticky," erotic affects that exist within the realm of romantic relationships. I look at the sticky, erotic potentialities that materialise when the erotic is deeply affirmed. In the chapter's second arc, I examine how sticky affects saturate and persist in romantic spaces, where entanglements sap rather than energise and cling in ways that strain the erotic's liberatory promise. The erotic here is dulled, its potential diminished under the weight of unmet desires and unspeakable betrayals. I then zero in on how mupotsa, alongside gantsho and Putuma portray the emotional intensities that come with the experience of abortion, consequently creating avenues for expression and possibilities for repair. In closing, mupotsa's eropoetics bulges with a materiality of feeling that affirms the Black female body as a feeling entity, with her feelings to attend to, to nourish and to repair.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Conclusion

We are the ones we have been waiting for.

—June Jordan, "Poem for South African Women" (1980)

Introduction, overarching research findings and conclusions

This study situates Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* (2017), vangile gantsho's r*ed cotton* (2018) and danai mupotsa's *feeling and ugly* (2018) within the evolving praxis of post-transitional Black women's speaking and visibility in South African poetry. The study emerges from the recognition of a literary tradition that has often silenced or marginalised Black women's voices, both in literary creation and in literary criticism. As Daymond *et al* (2003: 30) note, "in poetry, as in fiction, the leading figures have been named as male." Gqola (2011:06) similarly observes this imbalance, noting the skewed attention afforded to male poets, while Boswell (2011: 11) and Byrne (2016: 27) criticise the continued neglect of Black women's poetry even in post-transitional South Africa. Beyond this neglect lies a broader undervaluing of Black women as "thinkers, creators, or dreamers with the ability to imagine new worlds or alternate futures" (Boswell, 2017: 01). It is within this trajectory that this study necessitates the amplification of Black women's voices in poetry and literature at large. It identifies with the view of the Combahee River Collective (cited in Sobande and Emejulu, 2022: 237)—a Black feminist U.S. socialist organisation[10] that that operated in the late twentieth century— that "Black women are inherently valuable, that [their] liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of [their] need as human persons for autonomy." The works of Putuma, gantsho and mupotsa embody this ethos. They

[10] It is worth noting the Collective was, beyond being socialist, advocating for the rights of Black lesbians in the United States.

unequivocally assert their presence and consequently demand a recognition of the full spectrum of Black women's lived experiences—their joy, their oppressions, their erotic, and their capacity to imagine worlds beyond what history has made available.

To make sense of the three Black women poets' speaking and visibility, this study employs a multi-theoretical framework. It conceptualises the symbiosis of the concepts of resistance and resilience, arguing that these concepts mutually reinforce one another. That is, resistance fortifies resilience and resilience nurtures resistance. The study makes the case that the three Black women poets embody this symbiotic energy both within and outside the texts. In other words, the very act of writing and publishing these texts, considering their (historical) marginalisation in literary spaces, speaks to their double embodiment of resistance and resilience, which is also present within the speakers within the texts. Outside the texts, the poets challenge the restricted visibility and voices of Black women in literature. They engage in this struggle by, as Byrne (2016: 28) articulates it, "claiming the right to speak" and dismantling the gendered divide between the public and the private. Within the texts, they confront a range of injustices, including the white gaze, white heteropatriarchy, patriarchy and its attendant acts of violence, as well as the hegemony of heteronormativity. By foregrounding their concerns and asserting their right to speak, they carve out a central role in the emergent public culture (Baderoon, 2018: 01), thus expanding "what counts as political" (Gqola, 2011: 06). The theoretical stance of the study is that such determination is actualised through the embodied symbiotic energy of resistance and resilience.

The study uses Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality and Fred Moten's (2003) concept of fugitivity as key guiding analytic tools. Intersectionality is employed to explore the complex matrices of power that entrap Black women, as illuminated in the texts under study. Thinking along with Trinh (1991), Byrne (2016: 28) asserts that a "[B]lack woman in post-apartheid South Africa is still likely to experience 'the triple oppression of the

not-quite-second-sex and the kept-in-the-shadow-of-the-other.'" This oppression is vividly illustrated by the poets, and intersectionality provides the lens through which its complexity is examined. Moten's (2003) fugitivity, in turn, facilitates an exploration of how the poets respond to their oppressions through acts of subversion, escape, and repair, challenging "the proper and the proposed" (Moten, 2018: 131). These conceptual frameworks enable an understanding of how intersecting oppressions—patriarchy, white heteropatriarchy, the white gaze, homophobia, and societal conscriptions—manifest in Black women's embodied subversions, resistance, and reparative acts.

The study incorporates several other theoretical concepts, including Andrew Brooks' (2020) fugitive listening, Helene Strauss' (2022) resonant feminist listening, Audre Lorde's (1984) notion of the erotic, Sara Ahmed's (2014) sticky affects, and Jovan Lewis' (2023) fugitive repair. The first two concepts, while pervasive throughout the thesis, are most prominently utilised in the analysis of vangile gantsho's *red cotton* (2018) as a textual "spillage" to the reader. These concepts, within the context of Black women's speaking and visibility, prioritise listening as an ethical act, for in listening, we make "space for someone's voice—to return not only to themselves, but also to us. It is in creating space for another's voice to be heard that we build community" (Stuart cited in Xaba 2018: 155). By foregrounding listening, these frameworks elucidate how the poets, in their speaking and visibility, function as amplifiers to disrupt the silencing effects of hegemonic control. The final set of frameworks—Lorde's (1984) erotic, Ahmed's (2014) sticky affects, and Lewis' (2023) fugitive repair—are particularly valuable in the analysis of mupotsa's *feeling and ugly* (2018). These concepts illuminate how mupotsa constructs the Black female body as an agentic, affective entity, with its feelings to attend to.

Chapter 1 charts the genealogy of Black women's literary production in South Africa, from the colonial era through apartheid to the contemporary moment. It examines the confluence

of interlocking oppressions that have systematically constrained and marginalised Black women's writing, including the restrictive educational apparatus—first, missionary education, later the Bantu education system—combined with patriarchy within both indigenous and colonial structures, unequal access to material resources, lack of leisure time and financial security, psychological disempowerment, limited access to literary publications, censorship by the apartheid government, and exclusions from critical anthologies and broader critical discourses on poetry (Clayton, 1989; Mofokeng, 1989; Driver, 1996; Daymond *et al*, 2003; McDonald, 2009; Gqola, 2011; Kunene, 2014). It then delineates how Black women poets courageously assert their voices and visibility in post-transitional South Africa. It also provides a critical review of the selected primary texts, articulates the theoretical scaffolding, explains the research objectives and questions, and explicates the methodological design.

Chapter 2 determines that Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* (2017) enacts a poetics of refusal. Her poetry dismantles power structures that confine Black life, especially the lives of Black women and Black queer women. Putuma rejects colonial impulses that reduce Black experience to fixed narratives. She asserts the multiplicity of Black subjectivities through her confrontations with oppressive systems. Her work repositions poetry as an act of insurgency and disruption. It challenges normative limits and envisions alternate futurities that defy the weight of colonial and societal circumscriptions. Putuma exposes the persistence of hetero-patriarchal and patriarchal violence in South Africa's post-transitional period. By disentangling these residues, she kindles possibilities for emancipatory being, for living otherwise. This chapter identifies a shared "poetics of refusal" across Putuma, gantsho, and mupotsa through which compliance, conditioning, and the very conditions of domination are unsettled.

Chapter 3 reveals that vangile gantsho's *red cotton* (2018) engages the violences of patriarchy as a terrain of resistance and escape. Her poetics operates as an uncontainable spilling to the

shore, the reader. The findings demonstrate that her work spills forth the mechanisms of societal conditioning that normalise patriarchal violence while simultaneously carving possibilities for defiance. The analysis underscores the impossibility of flight to an "elsewhere" (Priest, 2018; Anucha, 2023); instead, gantsho locates resistance within the unrelenting motion of fight and flight, co-constituted and inextricable. gantsho positions the Black female body as a site of contestation and reclamation, refusing its relegation to subjugation under heteronormative and colonial gazes. Across gantsho, Putuma, and mupotsa, the reclamation of the Black female body emerges as a counter-narrative, asserting its erotic and agentic capacities in defiance of historical denigration (see Marshall, 2011; Graham, 2012; Felkins, 2015; Gqola, 2015; Musser, 2016; Slatton, 2017; Boswell 2018).

Chapter 4 argues that danai mupotsa's *feeling and ugly* (2018) advances an *eropoetics*, a poetics steeped in the erotic as a modality of embodied fugitivity. Mupotsa renders the Black female body as a locus of affective intensity, oscillating between the extremities of love and its loss. Her engagement with unrequited love and infidelity reveals the visceral adhesions of affect, a persistent troubling of the body's interior and exterior worlds. The findings further suggest that mupotsa's *eropoetics* makes space for the disquieting and disenfranchised griefs, such as the loss experienced through abortion, rendering the body an expressive site of agency, resistance, and repair. Her poetry, alongside that of gantsho and Putuma, constructs affective spaces where the grief of abortion—a grief often excluded from dominant affective registers—can be acknowledged and felt. The chapter reveals that mupotsa cultivates a language for the troubled feeling of the Black female body, one that even reframes conventional notions of embodied justice.

The study concludes that, in their speaking and visibility, the three poets are determined to disrupt the sedimented architectures of colonial and patriarchal domination. Their works constitute a poetic counter-public, a terrain of speaking, visibility and transformative praxis

where hegemonic structures are unsettled and outrightly refused. All in all, their speaking and visibility, to harken back to Putuma's (2018: 81) poem "Teaching" once more, materialises as a "weapon used to exorcise a lineage of silence;" "a medicine to heal years of silence;" "a doctrine used to deliver one from the ills of silencing;" "a tool used to dismantle a learnt behaviour of suffering alone in silence;" "a middle finger to the erasure and silencing of womxn like [them];" "a FUCK YOU to the canon." This poetic arsenal, though Putuma (2018) distils it in only six lines, encapsulates the central ethos of this thesis as a whole.

Research strengths and contributions

The three texts under study are chosen for their exemplifying of Black women's speaking and visibility in post-transitional South Africa. This works to spotlight Black women's contemporary poetry in South Africa. As Lebo Mashile (cited in Xaba, 2018: 221), one of the most illustrious Black South African poets, remarks: "the literary establishment in South Africa remains, to this day, overwhelmingly white, the overtly politicised poetic voice is historically characterised as being Black male." The study challenges this exclusion and contributes to the burgeoning scholarship on post-transitional Black women's poetry in South Africa. The study is anchored in the analytical categories of "Black" and "woman," to selectively put to the fore Black women's speaking and visibility, because "without these analytical categories, the contributions of [B]lack women poets disappear, rendering them discursively invisible in literary mappings" (Boswell, 2011: 12).

Another significant strength of the study is its focus on how Black women poets' voices contend with the normative, the colonialist, the patriarchal. The study zooms in on the covert and creative forms of Black women's resistance of power structures and the alternative ways in which futurity-oriented sociabilities are conjured. The study embraces how poetry mediates and expresses lived experiences: the livingness of Black life, the life and aliveness

of the Black woman, the lovability of the Black female body, and the liveliness of the queer Black woman. Another key strength of the study is its prioritisation of how Black women poets cultivate life's wayward energies, more in conjunction with Black women's affective and embodied experiences, and the healing possibilities that materialise as a result. The cross-disciplinary approach of the study enriches and opens to various scholarly discourses and fields, including Black studies, cultural studies, gender studies, African literature, intersectionality, Black feminism, feminist theory, queer theory, trauma theory and affect theory.

Research limitations and recommendations

While the study advocates for the magnification of Black women's speaking and visibility in literary spaces, the scope of representation is only limited to Black women poets in South Africa. Future research might expand to include other African or diasporic contexts in order to capture the multiplicity and heterogeneity of Black women's experiences and iterations across diverse geographies.

Moreover, although this study sought to excavate the specific oppressions faced by Black queer women, particularly in the analysis of Putuma's "No Easter Sunday for Queers," it did not fully engage with the cultural dimensions of these oppressions due to the constraints of its scope. Recent studies show that queerness in Africa is contested as unAfrican by some (see Livermon, 2012; Coetzee, 2018). If queerness is considered unAfrican and/or incompatible with African identity, then it is also rejected by culture. Moreover, if Blackness is a site of abjection (see for instance Sharpe, 2016; Davis, 2023), then the African Black queer occupies a unique plane of this abjection: she is an object of abjection within frameworks of racial hierarchies and an object of abjection within her abject collective, the Black. This then means that the African Black femme confronts a nexus of forces: racism, patriarchy, religion, and culture—all working to disembody her. Livermon (2012: 315) elaborates this premise quite

succinctly when he argues that “to experience freedom in postapartheid South Africa, the [B]lack queer body must enter either a deracinated queerness or a [B]lackness divorced from sexuality.” Livermon’s argument begs the questions: what happens to the Black queer body that defiantly claims both its Blackness and queerness? How does the resistant Black queer body navigate the confluence of the systems of power, particularly cultural oppressions? What does this resistant Black queer body make for its futurity? Future research might delve into these questions, extending its scope to include the experiences of Black queer men.

The study, constrained by its parameters, did not engage with the healing potential of spirituality, particularly African spirituality, a recurring motif embraced by the poets under study, especially vangile gantsho. Future research might examine how Black women employ African spirituality as a site of resistance, healing, and reclamation of agency. Furthermore, this study limited itself to Black women’s poetry in the post-transitional period, leaving room for future scholarship to consider the continuum between poetry from the colonial and apartheid eras and that of the postcolonial moment. The study also confined itself to works written in English. A more expansive exploration might incorporate poetry written in indigenous languages so as to fully understand the spectrum of Black women’s poetic expressions.

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