

## The Late Gugulethu Siziba: A Tribute

Dion

Since I came to know Gugu, which is from 1998 when we both enrolled for the lower 6<sup>th</sup> form at the Mpopoma High School in Bulawayo, the last three weeks have been the most difficult in our relationship. It started with a habitual text that I sent checking if he was ready for what was meant to be an important day for him and those close to him. The text went unanswered, but I went unbothered in the midst of the morning rush. The lag time between our texts is something that was quite usual, but this one proved to be ominous. A call came almost an hour later when I was in the middle of traffic. It was not from Gugu, but I was sure it was about him. The most unimaginable about him! That day turned fatally fateful.

Since then, I have been in an awkward position of speaking about Gugu, rather than talking to him. Having been talking almost every day, as if we literally stayed together, it is awkward now that I have to continue speaking about him without him speaking for himself. I had to speak to family, friends and colleagues in different parts of the world; and I still have to say something about (and to) him today! This is just how much I take Gugu's untimely departure as a personal loss.

Gugu was one of my several best friends, but he is one of the very few that I could call honest friends. Ours is a friendship that matured with time. Despite walking together to and from school, studying two 'A' Level subjects together for two years and going to the same university for our first degrees, we only remained acquaintances until we became junior academics. He was more intelligent than me at school, more talented in sports, music and other co-curricular activities. Although he was unassuming, he was confident about everything he did. I envied him for that, and yet feared him. I mistook his confidence for arrogance. We were both relieved later on when we reflected on those years in Zimbabwe, and had a great laugh when he confessed that he had similar feelings towards me. We discovered that we actually had mutual respect for each other.

I remember Gugu and another friend making fun of me when I left Zimbabwe to do an MPhil at Stellenbosch in 2007. He had never heard of Stellenbosch University, and he thought I was only moving to flee economic hardships in Zimbabwe. He would do likewise three years on to join Wits, but as fate had it, he would become a *Matie* in 2011. We stayed together for a couple of weeks as he was finding his feet in the Western Cape while I was packing for Rhodes University. At that point, my PhD was at an advanced stage. He would be my host whenever I had business in Cape Town and Stellenbosch, including for my graduation in April 2012, which is memorable for the surprise party that he threw. Unfortunately, he gave me a stern warning against any crowd-pulling surprises when it was his turn in December 2013. After all, he was my host; and there are many living witnesses of his karate skills!

Gugu's PhD on language and the politics of identity marked a point of convergence in our academic persuasions after going separate ways from high school. He had become a sociologist from first year at the University of Zimbabwe. I became a linguist and, later, a lexicographer.

Geared up for his PhD, his conviction was that linguists were not doing justice to the social dynamics of language. He introduced me to Bourdieu, Blommaert and Goffman, among other sociologists whom he felt would enrich my scholarly engagement with language. His ideas and arguments were infectious, but death struck as I was still learning. We would read, write and teach together at Rhodes and Stellenbosch simultaneously. Long calls and WhatsApp chats at very odd hours had our worlds digitally conjoined into one. We had committed to driving each hard in order to make names for ourselves in the academy. I regret that our shared dream of co-publishing was suddenly shattered, mainly because I couldn't write as fast as he could. In any case, it was not a matter of writing fast at the expense of what and how you write. Gugu upheld hard work, passion, quality, human dignity, brutal honesty and social justice in and outside the academy. These virtues constitute the hallmark of his work in theme and tone. Racism, xenophobia and ethnicity are the key themes of his academic and creative work. Those themes represent scars on our bodies and in our souls, scars that will open and bleed as long as we lack his courage. Scary as the graphic images of these ills are in his works, my hope is that they energise our fight for social justice. Otherwise whatever posthumous eulogies we sing about himself and his work run the risk of turning Gugu into a celebrity corpse (<http://www.gugulethusiziba.org/creative-writing.html>). Having worked so hard, even during his final hours, his friends, colleagues and generations to come should find inspiration from his works. That is my consolation as I mourn a principled and exemplary companion. Rest in peace, Mbedzi, you worked as if you knew your deadline.