



Obituary: Gugulethu Siziba (1979–2017)

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OBITUARY: GUGULETHU SIZIBA (1979–2017)

Lloyd Hill

Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology
Stellenbosch University, South Africa
lloydhill@sun.ac.za

Gugulethu Siziba, who died on 14 February 2017, was a prodigious emerging scholar working at the intersection of sociology, migration studies and sociolinguistics. Siziba was born in Zimbabwe in 1979. He grew up in Bulawayo and completed his initial academic training at the University of Zimbabwe, Harare. After completing a master's degree in sociology, he worked as a researcher at the African Institute for Agrarian Studies (AIAS), in Zimbabwe.

In 2010, Siziba moved to South Africa, where he worked for a year as a researcher at the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, before enrolling for a PhD at Stellenbosch University. In 2011, he joined the Stellenbosch Graduate School PhD programme and later that year was awarded a Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa Fellowship by the Social Science Research Council, based in New York. At the 2013 Annual Congress of the South African Sociological Association (SASA), he was awarded first prize in the annual SASA student essay competition, based on a paper that he presented at the 2012 congress. He graduated in December 2013, after defending his thesis titled "Language and the Politics of Identity in South Africa: The Case of Zimbabwean Shona and Ndebele Migrants in Johannesburg". The PhD thesis took the form of a multi-sited ethnography and presented a detailed and nuanced analysis of the manner in which Shona and isiNdebele speakers use language to appropriate and craft spaces for themselves in Johannesburg.

From 2014 to 2016, Siziba held postdoctoral fellowships at Stellenbosch University. The first of these was a Stellenbosch Postdoctoral Fellowship, where he worked with Lloyd Hill and Simon Bekker on a National Research Foundation funded project titled "Language and Urban Social Space in South Africa". In 2016, he received a Carnegie Funded American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Postdoctoral Fellowship, which allowed him to begin the process of converting his thesis into a book – working at Stellenbosch University and the University of Ghana, Accra. During his seven-year



period in South Africa, Siziba demonstrated his potential to become a prolific scholar, completing a PhD and nine publications (three to be published posthumously). He read widely and had a particular talent for integrating theoretical ideas into thick descriptions of the contexts that he studied.

Gugu – as he was known to friends and colleagues – had a humorous demeanour and a diffidently embodied charm and self-confidence that ever so often betrayed a painful past. Two traumatic periods in Zimbabwean history shaped him profoundly: the Gukurahundi massacres in Matabeleland during the 1980s and the “Kukiya-kiya” economic crisis (2000–2008), during which many Zimbabweans headed to South Africa and other countries. The pain of the Zimbabwean decline is deftly reflected in both his academic and creative writing. Gugu’s academic treatment of core themes – migrant spaces, xenophobia and the language of the urban stranger – was impressive. But his recourse to creative writing – notably poetry and satirical fiction – brings to these themes a certain emotional quality, an acerbic edge. It is here that we see more clearly the tensions of a transnational and the paradoxes of a kind of double exile ... in Bulawayo, in Johannesburg and in Stellenbosch. Here we peer briefly into what, in one of his poems, he calls “the abyss called nowhere ...”.

The premature passing of this remarkable scholar is a blow to the Zimbabwean and South African academies. However, his academic and creative work have been compiled and made available on a commemorative website (<http://www.gugulethusiziba.org/>).