

Remembering Gugulethu Siziba (1979-2017)



On this day¹, as we mourn the untimely passing of a son, a brother, a partner, a colleague and a friend, I would like to provide you with a glimpse of what Gugu meant to me.

Gugu joined our Department as a PhD student in 2011, and my first impression was that of an affable, witty and rather obviously intelligent person. This was my first PhD supervision and Gugu helped to shape my sense of this role in a way that perhaps no other student ever will. I very soon noticed that the overt authority of my position in this relationship belied a more complex process of mutual symbolic exchange. I had the advantage of a few years, and the advantages of a privileged white South African positioning... but he had something else... his own unique intellectual trajectory, a humorous demeanour and a diffidently embodied charm and self-confidence that ever so often betrayed a painful past.

I was at first most obviously impressed with his capacity to read; his was a voracious appetite for books and I was struck by his ability to quickly assimilate ideas from different domains. We shared a fascination with language and debates on the nature of language. Drawing particularly on the works of Bourdieu, we had many long discussions on the various manifestations of symbolic power... on the potential that “languages” – and symbolic codes more

¹ Read at the funeral in Bulawayo, on Thursday 23 February 2017, and presented at the commemoration hosted by the Stellenbosch Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, on Wednesday 8 March 2017.

generally – have to both empower and bewitch. After the PhD, as our relationship became more collegial, I came to appreciate his talent for reflective observation “on the hoof.” One such context was Yokohama, Japan, where in 2014 we attended the World Congress of the International Sociological Association. The painful histories of our countries travelled with us and Yokohama gave us a new and semi-detached space to explore these. I remember jokingly commenting that we are “both amakwerekwere here”, to which he quipped “ah, but I am more marked...”

More recently, I came to appreciate his writing. From the beginning I was impressed by his capacity to write quickly. He finished his PhD and a journal article in the three years allotted in terms of the Graduate School bursary. But only after the PhD did I begin to appreciate *both* his prodigious academic potential *and* his creative flair. 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...”

To disappear

It is to be unheard

To speak silent words

It is to be invisible

Not to speak or write

Except in a code that is illegible

It is to be intangible

It is to not exist

Or to exist only in memories that persist

Figments of the mind

The sight of the blind

And secrets of the divine

They seek yet they cannot find
Invisible men and women
The grim reaper's harvesting season
Swallowed whole by the earth
And hidden in its dark folds and embrace
To be unknown and not to know
To be denied names
To be denied rest
Even in death²

Gugu was a remarkable person, and his premature departure is a blow... for the Zimbabwean and South African academics... and for the people who knew and loved him. And so may I extend my condolences to his family and friends. I am sad, but I would also like to celebrate what he achieved and who he was. May his writing and the lived impressions that he made live on, to be appreciated anew by those who knew him and those who did not.

Lloyd Hill

² From "Ode to the nameless", by Gugulethu Siziba.