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IN CONVERSATION

“Language Has the Power to Reinvent Itself”: An Interview with Susan N. Kiguli

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Termed “the leading intellectually astute voice in contemporary East African poetry” by Evan Mwangi two decades ago, poet-professor Susan N. Kiguli is known as an accomplished scholar of oral poetry and popular song, a legendary teacher, and perhaps most of all, a writer of consistent integrity.[1] Kiguli’s first collection of poetry, *The African Saga* (1998), was a landmark—the first book of poetry published by FEMRITE, the Uganda Women Writers Association, and only the second book of poetry ever published by a Ugandan woman. Her collection garnered half a dozen reviews in Ugandan newspapers and sold two thousand copies in a matter of months.[2] Sometimes mistaken for a German translation of *The African Saga*, Kiguli’s second collection, *Zuhause Treibt in der Ferne* or *Home Floats in the Distance* (2012), features English-language poems by Kiguli with facing-page German translations. With Hilda J. Twongyeirwe, Kiguli co-edited FEMRITE’s first full-scale poetry anthology, *Wondering and Wandering of Hearts: Poems from Uganda* (2017). In 2023, Kiguli received the Lifetime Achievement Award in Poetry, the first African poet to be so honored, at the International Civil Poetry Festival in Vercelli, Italy. Edited by Antonella Sinopoli, Kiguli’s third collection, *Terre che piangono* or *Weeping Lands* (2023), presents Kiguli’s poems in English with facing-page Italian translations. It was launched in Kampala in September 2024. Two months later, on November 22, 2024, Professor Kiguli and I spoke in her office at Makerere University about her new collection, her relationship to languages including Luganda and English, the true meanings of power, and her poems about world-class runners.[3]

Nathan Suhr-Sytsma: How many of the poems in *Weeping Lands* are published for the first time?

Susan N. Kiguli: The publishers insisted on some of the older poems, but most of them are new in terms of even dissemination. Of course, some of them have appeared in magazines, or I’ve read them somewhere, performed them, but most of them were not accessible to the public. The publisher’s idea was to make my poems accessible to a wider public and celebrate my efforts at contributing to civil poetry, so it was very nice of them to do this, especially in a different language. I was very excited about that, the translation into another language.

NS: Had you had any sort of contact with Italian or with Italy before?

SK: Yes, one time a young researcher came and she was very interested in my work. I think she even translated one poem, but that was at a very informal level. […]

I am always very excited about having my work translated into another language, because like Ngũgĩ has always argued, language is a carrier of culture and people’s ways of looking at things and people’s worldviews in essence. So if your work is translated into another language, then you are having a conversation in that language. I actually have a poem in Luganda that is translated into a number of languages. I wrote it as “Olulimi olwange nólulwo …” My colleague Dr. Merit Kabugo translated it into English. He called it “My Language and Your Language.” Of course, when you write in Luganda and the kind of images used there are translated, sometimes the weight is not the same. Dr. Kabugo is excellent, but still it’s not about the excellence of what the art of translation is doing. I think of what Robert Frost was talking about, that the poem is sometimes lost in translation.

It’s a very long poem, but it begins:

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Behold, the Baganda have a proverb,
Only good neighbors can eradicate couch grass from their fields.
So when your language holds hands with my language,
Behold how they march along jubilantly
And they orate tales and chronicles
My chronicles and your chronicles
Behold how they dialogue and rule
over the earth.
Behold how they subdue conflict.
Behold how disagreement becomes a dilapidated house
It becomes a scornful miscarriage.
We despise it
Because your language
is holding hands with my language.
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Probably because it’s a poem on language, people are keenly interested in it. Language does a lot of things that we cannot even unravel or pin down. It’s a very mobile thing. It’s a very fluid thing, because it interacts with you as an individual, but also now we are talking, we are interacting with this communication, so it’s like a loop, like a spiral, really, knitting people together, knitting a lot of things together. It’s very hard to say, “this is exactly what it is.” And I think that’s the beauty of it.

NS: Do you think your relationship to language, either to Luganda or to English, has changed over time?

SK: I don’t know if I know exactly what you are asking. From childhood I was that kind of person who was extremely keen at finding out about language. Maybe when you’re young, you’re not critical about what language is doing. But I was always fascinated by the turn of phrase, by what it could achieve. When I came to university, I was really into this whole “speech act” thing and *How to Do Things with Words* and thinking about the power behind language and how just a word can move things or can name things forever or can continue a conversation. First of all, of course, my relationship with English has been based on the fact that it’s the medium of instruction. It’s the language that has constantly been around me in my upbringing and in my education journey. It’s a language that you can’t really set apart from us, but because of the whole colonial legacy, it carries a burdensome past and memory of oppression and subjugation of my people… it’s a huge thing. It’s a language that the missionaries used to erase and debase my people’s culture. But it’s also a language that I was taught from a young age.

I was a child who liked the books that other children maybe were not paying attention to, for example, Anne of Green Gables series by L. M. Montgomery. She’s Canadian, but a certain generation of British children, when I was in the UK, were very familiar with this series. Another Canadian author, Margaret Atwood was a favourite. And my friends when I was at high school would ask: “Why do you read Margaret Atwood?” But it was very fascinating what she does with language and the whole world of experience. Maybe what I’m trying to say is that reading in a language like English, with all its colonial history, opens up so much in terms not only of England, but because it has visited so many places on the globe, it carries experiences from different corners of the world. Yes, there is our little lovely corner of England raised by Shakespeare, but you are also reading so much when you read the Canadians, or when you read from Australia, when you read from Asia in English; you are not only just reading from England, now you’re reading other layers. You wish colonialism never happened, but it has happened in the circumstances. It has also opened up these spaces. The tensions never go away.

Now Luganda is a language I always say is constantly with me. I was born into the language. It’s the sounds that I constantly hear and I’m alert to in extremely interesting and sentimental ways sometimes. Because, when you speak Luganda, then you’re speaking the language of my mother, then you’re speaking the language of my clan, then you’re speaking the language of the people that I exist with every day and have extremely strong ties with, so there is something there. It’s a very complex thing, but it’s there. Of course, English also, there are so many friends that come with the language. But in terms of the grassroots, it may not be as anchored as Luganda.

I also have learned Dhopadhola, although I speak it with an accent. I learned it when I was here at university because my close friends come from there. They’re family now. So I don’t like to go to the village and not be able to hear what people are saying. I may not be able to answer as articulately and as fluently, but at least I can understand. That gives you a certain window into the little things, the little idioms, the little phrases, comments people make that could become big. Sometimes I get my poems that way.

The other day I was looking at a line. It wasn’t Dhopadhola, of course, but something that a colleague of ours, Sophie Lakot, said at a conference: “Being so generous with what you don’t have.” That could be a source of a powerful poem. Because things have been so tough in terms of work, I haven’t been able to write it, but maybe I may.

One of the legacies that Ngũgĩ has built over time is his whole question of making us

critically think about language and culture, even when he’s not the only African writer and scholar who has discussed the language question—Achebe has, so many others but Ngũgĩ has been extremely loyal to this discussion and he has been consistent. Especially in the whole context of East Africa, whenever any language issue comes up, Ngũgĩ has to come up. And even if you may say, for example, that, “oh, Ngũgĩ’s idea is now outdated,” it’s still there. It is classic. And of course, Ngũgĩ has been extremely benevolent, and he’s a very generous soul. We’ve met a few times. He’s extremely generous especially in terms of wanting younger people to come up and think very solidly about what our people are. Identity politics, even when he doesn’t say that, the term, is very central to what Ngũgĩ represents.

NS: We’re talking with his *Decolonising the Mind* and *Dreams in a Time of War* open in front of you.

SK: Yes. That’s why I’m talking Ngũgĩ. I tend to do that when I’ve been reading someone, and I’ve been talking about Ngũgĩ a lot. But also, I take him as a friend. I’m not in constant touch, because I know he has so many people who are in constant touch, but he is a very important voice in so many ways, socially, culturally, in our literature world.

NS: *Weeping Lands* is titled after one of your poems. How did that emerge as the title for the collection? Was that your choice or the translator’s?

SK: No, it wasn’t my choice. The curator, Antonella Sinopoli, thought that it speaks very much to the condition of Africa, but also the condition of the world.

NS: And the sections? The three parts make a kind of triptych.

SK: The sections were also made by the editor. But I agreed. I don’t know if the editor or the translator did it, but I thought it was quite well demarcated. When I sent the poems, I did not cluster them. Sometimes I struggle with that. Even with *The African Saga*, it was Professor Wangusa who clustered the poems. Because sometimes I find that poems have overlapped in theme. I tended to think about the poems that revolved around the mother figure, the strength of the mother’s voice. Those are the ones that I put first. Not that I clustered them like that, but I put them first. And then poems like “Tongue Touch Nambi Myth,” the poems that talk about a worldview that you had to come from Buganda to understand, or at least to come from here to understand, because the Kintu myth is a very big myth here. This is a very old poem. It came from a conversation with an American friend who is unfortunately dead now, Bonnie Shullenberger. I was at university here, and I was thinking that the Kintu myth, which we were being taught, was a very male story. Even Professor Kiyimba, who teaches orature, was saying, “this is a very male myth.” Bonnie was saying, “But you keep complaining about this Kintu myth being male. Maybe you could write something from a female perspective, even maybe when it may not fully explore the other ideas.” And so that’s why I called it “Tongue Touch”—let the tongue touch this Nambi myth and see what could come out of it. The poem has been in a number of workshops. A colleague at the University of York, Ruth Kelly, came here to do research on Creative Activism. We were doing some workshops together; we gave the actual original myth and then the poem and interesting conversations came up around the notions of gender, silence, cultural connections. The participants were challenged to come up with creative pieces based on the myth.

NS: One of the lines from “Tongue Touch Nambi Myth” that caught my attention was “Look I am a community and yet a single soul,” which sounds to me like what the philosophers call intersubjectivity (*Terre Che Piangono* 118). I was curious if you wanted to comment more on that idea of being both a community and a single soul.

SK: What, in the beginning, we are thinking about is that in the context from which we come as Africans, as African women especially, we are individuals. You can’t take away someone’s being an individual, but you also cannot take away our solidarity and our networks in thinking. Once you are a woman in an African community, you hold the community together. And so the community is part and parcel of you, but the community does not take away your identity and your definition as someone who is an individual. Otherwise, they would not name me Susan Kiguli, which begins to direct attention to my individuality. So there is this communion and interaction between the individual and the community. The individual influences the community, and the community influences the individual. And sometimes of course, we have made the community influence—or appear to influence—us more than we do as individuals. But also there’s all kinds of discourse that goes on around us. For example, we know that many people have said, “oh, the women in Africa are the storytellers,” but whose tale are you telling? And do you ever have time—because people condition you to tell certain tales—to reflect on those tales? Do you ever have reflection on how you bring up the children that you bring up or you interact with the people you interact with? Do you step back as an individual and say, “I’m doing this this way, but why? You see, why am I doing it this way?”

Maybe because of my literary background, the question “why” is a very important question to me. It’s a question that haunts me. It haunts me, but also works with me. Why is that that way and not the other way? How could it be if we flipped the coin? The whole sense of risk and adventure, the whole sense of confrontation with issues that are difficult, having conversations like people say these days, having difficult conversations. I think it’s very important to have those difficult conversations. There are things that are sometimes at the back of our minds and we push them back in Freud’s way. You push them back to the subconscious, because you don’t want them to overwhelm you, but that doesn’t take them away. Sometimes when you have these conversations, people may be very uncomfortable, but then it may help them actually and help you think through issues that may even be issues of bias. You think, “Okay, yeah, I said that. Why did Nathan get so annoyed?”—I’m saying this hypothetically —“why did Nathan get so annoyed or so pleased when I said that?” So then when you have a little time with yourself, you can then have a dialogue with yourself, little conversations with oneself. I like to be able to think through things first before I think through things with other people.

NS: One of the other poems that really stood out to me is “Reaching Within Us to Beyond Us,” which seems to be inspired by an occasion in the Makerere Art Gallery.

SK: Yes. We were having a workshop with Ruth Kelly on this whole writing activism issue. And they asked us in the workshop to write a poem around what was happening in the workshop, what we as individuals brought to the workshop, and what other people brought. I went to the workshop and so I was writing what was happening, but also breaking the boundaries to write beyond the workshop. For example, there was a figure without arms that looked female,[4] so I said to myself, “What could it symbolize? What could it mean? What if those arms were there? What if they were not? What happens when there are no arms?” And you have to imagine the arms, all these ideas were coming to me. I didn’t know that it would stand out because it’s almost very topical.

NS: You were speaking earlier about being thrilled by the idea of words as speech acts, how to do things with words. I noticed the lines, “All of us in the confined room are / Speaking and creating worlds” (58). This idea of creating worlds or poetry as worldmaking is really important.

SK: And breaking boundaries, but also being able to give agency to oneself and to others. When you create a world, then you are very powerful. It gives you power. Maybe you noticed that I did have a little epigraph from Michel Foucault…

NS: I was going to ask you about it. How did you decide to incorporate that epigraph?

SK: Because I thought that what was happening at that workshop with the artists was very powerful. And I think that Michel Foucault’s ideas of power are very interesting ideas. People say, “Oh, but he’s a Western philosopher, so why don’t you come home?” But he’s a Western philosopher who talks about extremely important ideas about power and power relations in society. Just because he’s Western, you cannot dismiss the power of his thinking and of his theorizing. If it speaks to me, then it works. That means he has communicated. My own thinking is that Foucault is a very profound philosopher, but even in his own personality he was never really at home with everything surrounding him. Even him, he had his own tensions. So he’s a very good reflection of how this world works. And he’s also a very good reflection of thinking through very consistently the things other people don’t want to think through. *The*

Archeology of Knowledge, *Discipline and Punish*. You see Foucault was taking on the whole world of the structures of power that had made themselves feel like they’re the standard, how these powers came to control us without even us thinking about them, and the fact that there is a history to these powers and these institutions, even when you see them and think they’re innocent and you ascribe to them and love them like the school because they have their benefits. But what is the philosophy behind the school? What is the philosophy behind the prison? What is it that the people who came up with these institutions were advancing? What are we advancing and when we advance it, what happens to other people who may be in this but are not powerful enough to actually survive it? I think he was a very sensitive soul, as a philosopher, very, very aware of how marginalities were shaping the world. I don’t know, but I think he was a man way before his time. I mean, he saw into the future.

I also used some very powerful—I thought—ideas that came from the workshop. What do people want? What is being given to them? It’s tucked in the middle of the poem, but it’s a very important issue of this whole; it goes back to the whole idea of power. Who holds the power, and what is power? And is power constant? Is it something even you can define and pin down, or is it a shifting paradigm? And it’s not just power, but what are power relations? At the very heart of thinking about this world as someone female and I’m in this patriarchal society, am I as helpless as people say? Are mothers as discounted as people say? But they’re the ones with whom we bond right from the beginning. There are other bonds, of course. The fact that it’s never one gender that gives birth to a child. It’s male and female, right from the conception. But who has physical control over the child as they grow? Whose words do you hear? And whose influence do you have close interaction with? Of course women have been marginalized, but they’re also extremely powerful in terms of the influence of every day. There is nothing more powerful than every day. Let’s say you brush your teeth every day. If you neglect doing that, the consequences are very dire. But it’s a very simple thing.

NS: If I may ask you about one other poem, “They Say We Speak Broken English,” I also see language and artmaking or kinds of making come together in that poem.

SK: It’s an old poem dealing with the whole issue of someone wanting to own the language. So you speak broken English because someone has, in their authority and power, pronounced that there is a standard dialect. But what is standard? Especially in terms of English, this is a whole debate that we’ve had going on for so long. What is this Received Pronunciation and all that? But the poem deals with the whole issue of relationships, how relationships can tumble over each other, because language does that. What you say could break a home. What you say could cause fracture. Now when the pots are broken, water cannot be in these pots. So it’s almost like language can either bond or cause disintegration. Going back to the whole concept of power, it was the whole idea of the strength of language and what it can do and what it cannot do. And I just used familiar images of girls carrying pots to the well to talk about art and molding and the power of bringing into existence—and then the power of being able to proclaim or to denounce.

NS: Is it the case that if pots shatter, the clay can be reused into new things? Or is this your imagining that language is clay ready to be molded into new pots?

SK: If clay shatters, it can be taken back, because we have the whole idea of recycling things. We recycle plastic more than we recycle clay. But if the clay is got, it can be done, it can be remodeled. But of course the imagination also can be remodeled into

new things. I was trying to say in the poem, “They Say We Speak Broken English”: that language is not a possession of one person or one culture, that language is something that can be reinvented in different spaces and different contexts. And that’s why we have Creole, we have Pidgin, we have all these because language has the power to reinvent itself, to create new avenues and new subways and new skylines and new horizons.

NS: Would it be fair to see *Weeping Lands* as invested in environmental concerns, too? As a poet, how do you relate to the more-than-human world?

SK: This question is really tough but so essential, because in writing I want to move beyond the body to all the world evokes and invokes. I want to speak to an all round existence and to think about survival within the surrounding world and beyond. I inevitably think about co-existence and the wholesome beauty made by not just using the world as a human being but the complex relationship between human existence and the worlds both physical and imagined that envelope us as human beings. I am aware even in writing my poems of the complex and intricate relationships between the human beings, human experience, the natural world and the forces beyond the natural world. I think the natural world is an integral part of human existence and should be viewed as such. That is why you see that I weave so many images from nature into my poetry. I attempt to sensitively say without preaching that the environment is part and parcel of who we are and we should respect it and preserve its power. In my writing poetry, I am conscious of the agency of both human beings and the natural world, that is why I am so invested in the images from the natural world and their powerful influence on us as human beings. I believe that human beings cannot continue their anthropocentrism approach without consequences. The natural world and the forces beyond the physical are powerful elements that people cannot afford to ignore or abuse.

NS: And then the collection, of course, ends with two poems about runners.

SK: I didn’t even realize that it ended with these. Sports is one of those pastimes that I think about very carefully; I’ve written quite a number of poems on runners. Actually, I’m writing one on Rebecca Cheptegei, she was murdered by her lover. When we were having a conversation on *Weeping Lands*, at the launch in September 2024, I read a new poem on Joshua Cheptegei, because I think he’s a fascinating figure. And it goes back to the whole concept of human agency. These runners, most of them, even Mo Farah, most of them either they have migrated from somewhere or they cannot fully claim the territory in which they are, but they make something almost out of nothing so that their names are there forever.

So I’ve written “Joshua Cheptegei 2024.”

The boy from the highlands
Has scaled the heights again

Cheptegei has brought gold
And a sprightly jaunt in our step

He ran this race like his legs
were made from the wind

My heart was in my eyes
As I watched him whiz past

Berihu Aregawi and Grant Fisher
Like he was made to fly

As the whole world watched
Uganda prove we are made for gold

I took it in and every nerve
In my body was proud

I lauded him as he posed
For the camera lights with our flag

I chuckled when he signed off
With “I'm off to the roads

I have won all there is
To win here on the track.”

In the Cheptegei posture

I refuse to bow to shame
I refuse to bow to all the

People who do Uganda wrong
I refuse to bow and choose

To hail Uganda’s youth
That see a future for this country

I stand with Uganda’s antelope
Focused on holding on to Uganda’s dream

The world champion
The world record holder
Olympic champion 2024
The fastest 10,000 in history
Holding up the Ugandan flag.

[1]Evan Mwangi, “Hybridity in Emergent East African Poetry: A Reading of Susan N. Kiguli and Her Contemporaries,” *Africa Today* 53, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 42.

[2]Susan N. Kiguli, “FEMRITE and the Woman Writer’s Position in Uganda: Personal Reflections,” in *Words and Worlds: African Writing, Theater, and Society*, ed. Susan Arndt and Katrin Berndt (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), 171–72.

[3] I gratefully acknowledge IfeOluwa Nihinlola’s assistance with transcribing this interview.

[4]*Erotica* (1995-1997) by Dr. Angelo Kakande. Thanks to Margaret Nagawa for assistance identifying this sculpture.

About the Interviewer:

Nathan Suhr-Sytsma is Associate Professor of English and a core faculty member of the Institute of African Studies at Emory University in Atlanta. He teaches and writes about twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry, African literature, and literary imaginings of the planet. His first book, *Poetry, Print, and the Making of Postcolonial Literature*, was published in 2017 by Cambridge University Press. His second book, *African Poetry Worlds in the Twenty-First Century*, is under contract with Oxford University Press. With Ryan Topper, he co-edited Poetics from the Global South, a special issue of the journal *Interventions* published in 2024 that includes an article on Susan N. Kiguli’s poetry. His public-facing reviews and interviews have appeared in venues including the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and *Image*.

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