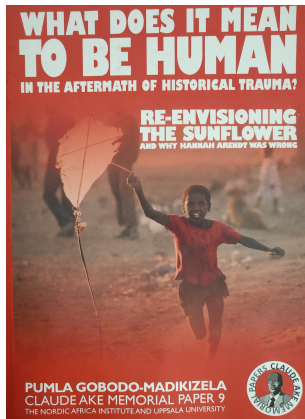


“Critical Auto-Ethnography and Textual Analysis: An Interview with Dr. Kalembe Kizito¹

By Emily Vandenberg

“During the George Floyd protests at the peak of the pandemic, people didn’t care anymore about social distancing--they just went out. I thought, “Why are these people, in spite of this health hazard, going out and protesting?” That’s what really forced me to think that there is something interesting happening here. I saw linkages between fighting against police brutality but also as a larger statement about black life in the context of public health. That’s where I’m starting my inquiry.” –Dr. Kizito



Kalembe Kizito is a critical rhetorical scholar who is passionate about cultural studies. Born and raised in Uganda, he came to the United States 20 years ago after getting his law degree. He received his Master’s degree from Cal State East Bay, and his PhD from the University of Memphis and is currently working on projects related to gentrification in the Bay Area, Black Lives Matter and COVID-19. Dr. Kizito is currently a Visiting Teaching Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Denver.

Interviewer **Emily Vandenberg** describes herself this way. “I am a senior at DU, studying biology and French, and am also a team captain of the women’s varsity swim team. I enjoy doing interdisciplinary work, because I think that disciplines are intertwined and work better together as a whole. I hope when I graduate to either become a teacher or a doctor.”



Vandenberg notes further: “Dr. Kizito and I met when I decided to take his class “The Social Construction of Travel,” a class centered around the myriad ways people and ideas become mobile. Through this class, students are taught about the cultural, economic and health impacts of travel, and how to further understand society through the lens of travel. Our conversation took place virtually over zoom, to accommodate for social distancing on Friday, March 6th, 2021. Doug Hesse, the director of the writing program at DU also participated in the interview with me.”

¹ This is one in a series of nine interviews of University of Denver professors. Each was conducted by an undergraduate in the Minor in Applied Writing, as part of a course, “Theories of Writing.” The interviews explored professors’ early memories of writing; influences on and thoughts about their own development as writers; some of their current writing practices; and other matters related to writing and teaching. For more information about the series, please contact Professor Doug Hesse, dhesse@du.edu.

Emily Vandenberg: How did you get to where you are today in terms of writing? What challenges did you face?

Kalemba Kizito: Like you, I was not born and raised here. You hinted at the beginning of this interview that you were from Canada, and when you got here you realized that there are differences in writing. I was born and raised in Uganda and the way we wrote English in school there is very different from my experience here.

English was one of my best subjects in Uganda. I lived in Uganda until I finished my first degree and then I moved to the United States. I had a 10-year gap between my first degree, which was in law, and when I joined graduate school here in the United States. I was shocked when I started writing papers here. I thought I had a good grasp of writing. I don't want to say that I didn't know there were differences in writing between countries, but I hadn't appreciated it until I came to the US.

Luckily for me, my master's thesis supervisor was a professor from Toronto, so he was able to explain to me that "I get what you're doing, and I understand your writing, but in the United States it's a little different." So, I struggled to think like an American and learned the hard way that I had to make adjustments to fit into the academic system. I had to rethink a lot of the vocabulary, and to my surprise, when I used Microsoft Word for spelling errors, a lot of British English vocabulary I knew was flagged as incorrect.

Vandenberg: What was your thesis about?

Kizito: My master's thesis was about the 2008 Boston Tea Party. My writing is really motivated by current events and things I can relate with, that I'm curious about. That's how I get my writing topics. Right now, I'm working on an article about Black Lives Matter in the context of COVID-19. I have to be curious about something; I am not a very abstract theoretical writer. I really need to be triggered by an event and then get into my research groove.

Vandenberg: You mentioned that your master's thesis supervisor was a big influence on your writing here. Could you maybe elaborate on how he helped you or in what aspects he directed or changed your writing?

Kizito: So, I was getting a lot of comments from my professors about my writing. He would say, 'I understand you, but you're writing from the Commonwealth perspective.' So, his advice for me was to look at an American article, to look at how they write, and that's how I needed to present my ideas. My thought process flowed differently from the traditional structure of an American paper, so I had to organize my thoughts differently. So, I learned to look at the layout of an American paper and then adapt my papers to that.

Doug Hesse: I'm curious in your thesis and the Black Lives Matter piece that you're doing now, about your methodology. Are you doing critical analyses of texts? Are you doing interviews? I'm curious about the kind of research that you are doing.

Kizito: Right now, I'm doing discourse or rhetorical analysis. I'm looking at speeches, research articles and magazine articles that have been written about the pandemic. My interest really is about social justice, that's really where my research jumps off. So, I was looking initially at a lot of medical

reports saying blacks and other minorities are more likely to suffer the brunt of the pandemic and I was curious as to why that is. So, I started searching to find the underlying cause of this.

Another interesting point was during the George Floyd protests that happened at the peak of the pandemic. People didn't care anymore about social distancing--they just went out and protested. So, there were a lot of reports saying there was going to be a spike in the spread. When I saw this, I thought "Why are these people, in spite of this health hazard, going out and protesting?" So, that's what really forced me to think that there is something interesting happening here. I saw linkages between fighting against police brutality but also as a larger statement about black life in the context of public health. So, that's where I'm starting to do my inquiry.

Hesse: Parenthetically, as somebody who grew up academically in a rhetorical theory, history tradition, when you say doing rhetorical and discourse analysis I know where you're coming from. And, dear lord, what an important topic to be writing on right now.

Kizito: I'm just at the beginning my research so at the end of this semester, I think, is when I'm going to start checking out my initial draft.

Vandenberg: So, you've hit on a couple of parts of your writing processes. I know that you mentioned waiting for something to really impact you before writing, but could you speak to your entire process? What do you do to prepare for writing, during writing? And then when you revise?

Kizito: I just dump everything into a single word document. Any ideas I have, I just type them in the document, and then I start building a working references table. So, if I come across a report by the CDC or National Institute of Health, and I put those in my references, and if there is a quotation that speaks to me, I will put the quotation above and some comments that I have surrounding that. Then I can break it down into different themes and start sorting it.

If I'm asleep and an idea pops into my head, I'll get up and open up my document and type it in. Sometimes I type new ideas in different colours to show my progression of thinking. Then it makes it easier to follow the progression and see what I need to revise.

Hesse: When I was writing my dissertation, my wife bought me a standing desk. And I would wake up in the middle of the night with an idea and I get up and go to the standing desk and write it. By the next morning, it would have been nonsense, but every now and then, there was a good idea.

Kizito: That's true. It doesn't mean that everything I'm typing there is good. Sometimes you just have to cut out a chunk of stuff, but it's always good to have them in there and then you can see which one is good and which one needs to go. But I always prefer to have them centrally located in one single document.

Vandenberg: There are definitely a lot of similarities with my writing process. For years, I have had to write things down or else I'm going to forget it. Is there a certain structure that you follow in your writing? For instance, I know in biology, there is usually your abstract, methods, results, discussion, conclusions, etc. In your specific discipline, is there a structure to how you write certain articles?

Kizito: As a critical cultural studies scholar, I'm not really regimented in that way. Mostly, I do what we call textual analysis. I analyze texts, movies, speeches. It could be anything: it could be visual rhetoric, like a picture, a sign, anything of that sort. I mostly use critical rhetorical methods.

For instance, I'm trying to do something with gentrification and *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*. I have lived in the Bay Area since January 2001. I have seen the changes there, so *The Last Black Man in San Francisco* spoke to me in a unique way. So, if I'm analyzing a text like that. I have an introduction which highlights the issue of gentrification in the Bay Area. Then I introduce my text that I'm working with and give a brief synopsis of the movie. Then I identify themes and then in the actual analysis of the movie, I pay attention to scenes—where they are actually located, what is happening in particular scene, the dialogue that is taking place, nonverbal elements of the character--and then I try to make a few linkages. Then I try to bring my own voice into the essay.

Hesse: Now, when you say you bring your own voice, do you ever include autobiographical elements there or is it more in the voice of style?

Kizito: I completed my PhD in 2019, and my dissertation—in terms of methodology—was a mixture between critical auto-ethnography and textual analysis. I find my voice is a powerful tool, especially if you have a relatable lived experience to any phenomena you're looking at. I think it's powerful and justifiable to weave into my writing.

Vandenberg: I'm taking a science communication course right now, and a lot of it is straying from your typical structured elements in biology and framing it more as a story with personal detail in order for the public to really understand what you're getting at and be interested in what you're trying to tell them. That's really what I think makes a good writer, is the ability to connect with other people and use personal details, like you said. So, I'm just wondering what do you think makes a good writer in your area. Do you have any writers that you look up to?

Kizito: What makes a good writer... I think Doug is in a better position to answer that, because he has been at this for a very, very long time. One of the essays I have fallen in love with the most, was not an academic piece, it is just an essay written by a British writer. The title of the essay is "Where on earth are you?" and to me that is the best I've read. I've read a lot of stuff, but if I could write like that it would be awesome.

But I think a good writer is somebody who can convey their message in simple terms. Don't overcomplicate it.

When I was a first year PhD student, I was given a reading by Judith Butler. I read the whole thing and I couldn't understand anything. I thought, am I in the right place? What is going on here? To me, that is an example of very bad writing.

I strive to be the kind of person whose writing is accessible, not just to academic audiences, but to everyone. When you are gifted with this knowledge and you want to share it, you can't restrict the language with which you communicate with your potential audience. People can get really technical in their vocabulary within their discipline to [the point where] the public wouldn't understand them. However, if writing isn't accessible to the public, what's the point? How are you going to change the way someone thinks if they can't understand your writing?

Hesse: Emily, Judith Butler is a notoriously impenetrable author. She's very famous and very accomplished and no doubt deserves all of her many accolades, but when people are making fun of academic pros in our neck of the woods, she often gets cited.

Kizito: She actually won an award for worst writer or something like that.

Hesse: When you think back to when you were a kid, did you write much?

Kizito: As a kid, not really. Writing was very frugal; we only did that in school. I never had a chance to do any kind of fun writing. And moving to the States, there was a 10-year gap between my law degree in Uganda and when I went into my master's program where I tried to become a poet. I'm embarrassed about it, but my poems are stashed away somewhere. But that's how I kept my brain going during that break. I used to do a bunch of poetry on the side, not guided by anything, no structure. That's about the only time I did fun writing just for myself.

Hesse: Did you publish any of those poems or did you share them with others, or were they just entirely for you?

Kizito: I've shared them with one or two people. That's it. I have them but I'm embarrassed by them because I don't think I'm good at poetry. I have occasionally taken a look at them but then I put them away.

Vandenberg: I'm sure they're great! Would you say that there's anyone in your childhood, who had an influence on you, who helped you get to where you are today in terms of what you're interested in academically or in writing?

Kizito: As I said, growing up as a kid in Uganda, writing was not very accessible. We only had access to it through the books we would read. You know, like *Snow White*, casual reading. In school, teachers gave print-out exams and you just had to fill in a sentence or two. Then in English class, you had to do maybe a few paragraphs.

One thing I do know, is that I was good at English when I was growing up as a kid. I was born and raised in the capital city where English was accessible, but I had classmates from rural places who struggled with the English language. If you grew up in the city, you had access to learning the language just by virtue of the schools you went to. So, a lot of students would come to me if they needed to send love letters to friends, and I gladly did that. I was the person they came to for help to make it sound nice and so I did that.

Writing was one of my strong suits in high school, at one point I ran the school magazine called Foundations. That's how much I was involved with my writing at that level, but I didn't have any models to follow, so I would read and listen to a lot of BBC Radio. I would listen to the presenters and if they said phrases I liked, I would write them down and use them in my essays. I used to read newspapers and find interesting phrases as well. That's how I developed my vocabulary and a little bit of my writing style.

Hesse: You know that there's a long and interesting tradition of people like Benjamin Franklin in the United States, who say they learn to write by copying things or by recording phrases. I like the idea that you were the person people came to in order to write a letter to make it sound nice.

Kizito: I miss those days. It was because not everybody at the time had a fluency in the language. I grew up in the city, so I had access to TV and this and that, so it was much easier for me to pick up the language than people who came from rural areas.

Vandenberg: Yes, I definitely understand that as well. I was in French immersion from grade one until high school, so I didn't even learn English in school until grade five. And so, learning English was definitely different for me. My writing process in French isn't the same as it is in English. If you had any experience writing in a different language, could you touch on it?

Kizito: That is an interesting question because one of my earliest struggles writing here in the US was thinking in my language and then translating. It wasn't easy. After being here about 20 years now, I can process things quickly. The initial challenge was knowing something in your local language and then having to rephrase it in English, then to make it sound proper. So, I understand when you say that switching from your French background into English was a little bit of a struggle. When I was young, most of the time outside of school we were just using our language. English was something you did in class, and the moment you stepped out of class, you went back to your local language.

Hesse: What's the language you learn?

Kizito: Luganda. I am a Muganda. It's a little complicated, the British took my cultural community and then they tapped on other communities and then made it one. But my people are called the Buganda. I am from the Buganda kingdom, I speak Luganda, in the country Uganda.

Vandenberg: For clarification, you were mentioning that writing wasn't accessible in Uganda, what exactly did you mean by that?

Kizito: It's not like you have access to writing outside a writing class or anything like that. Pencils and all that weren't very economical, so if you weren't in class, you're weren't writing. One good thing when I grew up though was there was no Internet, so a lot of communication was done through letters. So, we had enough writing practice through that format. Many of us had several pen pals and that was the best way we experimented with the art of writing.