




# Stella Nyanzi the Activist-Philosopher

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## Abstract

Stella Nyanzi, the Ugandan medical and social anthropologist, feminist scholar and political activist is arguably a contemporary example of Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye's self-assertive person, and German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's free spirit. Gyekye and Nietzsche are most likely to be read through the binary lens that distinguishes African and Western thought, however, on closer inspection, their respective conceptions of people who are change agents in society show a striking convergence. This chapter aims to demonstrate that the self-assertive individual and the free spirit are agents of change who are crucial to the development, progress and overall advancement of humankind, within their respective socio-cultural and socio-political contexts. Their autonomous, self-determining, and self-assertive attributes *emancipate* them from conformity to the prevailing traditions, culture and morality of their societies. Their critical and contemplative thinking enables them to *re-evaluate* the customs, practices and rules of their communities. Their intellectual distinction equips them with the capacity to create and *incorporate* new and progressive values. Nyanzi appears to embody these attributes and they confer upon her the status of an activist-philosopher, someone who demonstrates a symbiosis of thought leadership and activism, theory and praxis. Furthermore, the "self-assertive-free spirit" profile developed in this chapter by referencing Nyanzi as a case study, could be true of many other change agents, in various cultural, societal and political contexts. Moreover, through the lens of women's political participation



in Africa, a “self-assertive-free-spirit” is an ideal candidate for feminist political leadership in Africa.

**Keywords:** Stella Nyanzi, Kwame Gyekye, Friedrich Nietzsche, Free Spirit, Change Agent, Feminist Activism, Feminist Theory, Feminist Political Leadership

## Introduction

Historians and scholars usually document the catalytic roles that some individuals play in the evolution of their societies, however, few of those documentaries offer a theoretical understanding of the attributes and activities of these exceptional individuals. In the context of feminist political leadership, there are some exceptional individuals who are catalytic change agents both in and out of formal politics. Thus a case study of medical anthropologist, scholar, feminist and political activist, Dr. Stella Nyanzi provides us with the opportunity to theorize women’s and feminist political leadership in Africa. A study of Nyanzi’s combined scholarship and activism helps us to formulate a framework of the attributes and quest of a change agent. She is arguably a contemporary example of Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye’s moderate communitarian self-assertive individual and German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s radical free spirit, as will be demonstrated throughout the chapter. Gyekye and Nietzsche are most likely to be read through the binary lens that divides African and Western thought, but on closer inspection, their respective conceptions of people who are change agents in society show a striking convergence. Both the self-assertive individual and the free spirit are exceptional individuals who are crucial to the development, progress and overall advancement of humankind, within their respective contexts.

Nyanzi’s body of work is composed of numerous scientific studies; more than sixty published academic works and she has been cited more than two thousand times. In her works, she often reaches controversial, although empirical conclusions on sexuality, HIV/Aids, human rights and African culture, among other topics that are central to African social wellbeing. Her observations and theories, which are conveyed through

her literary output and social commentary, have resulted in her being persecuted, harassed, threatened, imprisoned and marginalized. The sum impact of her radicalism, however, is that her emancipated resistance to moral, social and political conformity has distinguished her as a change agent. Her intellectual prowess has gained her credibility, as she is able to re-evaluate African society in intelligible ways that contribute to the body of knowledge, catalyse resistance and shine the international spotlight on authoritarian, patriarchal and paternalistic practices in Uganda, The Gambia, Tanzania, and Africa as a whole.

Towards theorizing Nyanzi as a change agent, firstly it is important to justify why the analytical framework employed derives from a male African philosopher and a male Western philosopher, to study an African feminist. This raises the question of methodology and the problem of studying African subjects through Western theories, as Oyèrónkẹ Oyèwùmí (1997) cautions. In this analysis, neither Gyekye nor Nietzsche are privileged but rather the focus is on Nyanzi. She captured the global community's imagination on 18 April 2016, when she staged a naked protest at the Makerere University in Uganda. Her disrobing protest was against alleged tyranny by university administrators who had also locked her out of her office because she refused to teach a particular course. Feminist academic and activist Sylvia Tamale happened to be at Makerere at that time and when she arrived on the scene, Nyanzi had put her clothing back on, but was still yelling obscenities and profanities. Despite Tamale's initial reaction of trying to bring Nyanzi in line with society's taboo conception of public nakedness, she later writes:

“Society ‘reads’ women’s bodies along the landmarks forged by the law. Female naked protests represent a resistance and subversion of the dominant scripts engraved on women’s bodies — scripts of subordination, passivity, sexuality, subservience, vulnerability, etc. Hence, through the process of naked protests, women engage in a re-scripting and reconfiguration of their bodies” (Tamale, 2017:79).

The significance of Nyanzi's naked protest as a reflection of self-assertiveness and an embodiment of a free spirit, lies in how it rescripts and reconfigures the female body to become a tool of resistance and rebellion. The documentary accounts of Nyanzi demonstrate that she is both an activist and thinker (philosopher) and can be found on many platforms, including South African History Online (2020), on media platforms (Newsweek, 19 April 2016; All Africa, 30 October 2016; BBC, 11 April 2017;), and in scholarly literature (Mudavanhu, 2019; Makoni, 2021; Kahyana, 2024; Byarugaba, 2024) among others.

Since that catalytic event at Makerere, she embarked on a political campaign of "radical rudeness" that questioned what Gyekye (2003:305) would term "inelegant, undignified, or unenlightened" cultural values; and what Nietzsche (1910:207) would call the "increased stupidity" that is often required for cultural conformity and stability. Nyanzi (2020:558) asserts and justifies her approach as follows: "I see radical rudeness as the only viable means to challenge those in power. As I have said elsewhere, challenging power isn't polite or beautiful." She went on to condemn Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni in the process by calling him "a pair of buttocks," and was subsequently imprisoned twice under cyber harassment laws for a combined period of almost two years (pen-international.org). In her own words, Nyanzi explains the circumstances around her first arrest in 2017:

"Specifically, they ridiculed me for publicly challenging the president and his wife for reneging on a promise to provide free sanitary pads to schoolgirls. On the third day of my detention with neither charge nor trial, I finally learnt that I was charged with using social media for public solicitation of money and fundraising for sanitary pads which I distributed across the country. I was not surprised by these attempts to criminalize my social media activity. The month before my arrest, I had already been subjected to gruelling interrogation at the headquarters of the Criminal Intelligence and Investigation Department (CIID). I had also been indefinitely suspended from my

permanent employment at Makerere University—allegedly because I insulted the First Lady who was also the Minister of Education. My home was under intense surveillance. My family’s movements were monitored, and our family vehicle was trailed. My phone communication was tapped. I was barred from boarding a plane to attend an academic conference at the University of Amsterdam and indefinitely banned from traveling abroad. And I received several anonymous death threats via social media, phone, and radio. After spending three nights in detention, I was arraigned before the Chief Magistrate’s Court amidst heightened security and charged with cyber harassment and offensive communication against the president of Uganda” (Nyanzi, 2020:552).

The profiles of emancipated individuals that are offered by the two philosophers can serve as a theoretical point of departure that can be aligned with decolonial and feminist epistemic imperatives. While situating Nyanzi, an African feminist, within this theoretical framework, there may be possible objections to this approach. For example, Nietzsche has been labelled a misogynist because of some of his derogatory statements about women. Also, Gyekye’s African philosophy tradition has the notorious reputation of erasing the contributions of women to African history, epistemology and leadership. In this respect, Africana philosopher Lewis R. Gordon speaks of “teleological suspension”, in his book *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (2006). This is a willingness to go beyond one’s discipline, methodology and ideology for the sake of engaging a pluralistic reality, in an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary manner.

As such, not only can the African-Western binary of personhood be dissolved in the case of profiling extraordinary individuals, but “male-centric” philosophies can also be of some utility as a discursive point of departure for critical feminist theorizing. Secondly, since Nyanzi is conferred with the title “activist-philosopher” in this chapter, it is crucial to define it for conceptual clarity. The double-barrelled term is

hyphenated to capture a symbiotic relationship between the two roles, even while each of them carries its own meaning. Thirdly, an outline of the quest of change agents is provided, elaborating on how they are produced by their cultural milieu to become *emancipated* from conformity; to *re-evaluate* traditions, customs and values; and to *incorporate* new knowledge and values, for the development and progress of their communities. Throughout the chapter, some examples of Nyanzi's feminist political leadership activities are cited.

### **Activist-Philosopher**

According to South African philosopher Mabogo Percy More, an activist or rebel who is also a philosopher, is not just simply someone who pursues disorder or lawlessness for its own sake, but is instead, fundamentally a revolutionary. He references Frantz Fanon's remark that, "anyone who rebels against the status quo becomes a revolutionary" (More, 2017:16). The notions of rebellion and revolution are also raised by feminist theorists who speak of "counter publics", constructed by feminist activism and theory. The notion of the "public" means that the status quo is constituted of public spaces (in concrete and abstract ways) that are constructed by and for males. Therefore, these public spaces must be reconstructed in order to accommodate non-male genders as well and the first step of this rebellion is the establishment of counter publics. South African feminist scholar Pumla Dineo Gqola (2021:36) argues that there needs to be greater acceptance and transformation to accommodate these counter publics.

Subversive and rebellious activism is always met with resistance by those who benefit from the status quo and this is sometimes a deterrent for activists. In this respect, Gqola (2015:15) adds that there will always be resistance to rebellion, and "[a]n effective backlash always does much more than neutralise gains, though; it reverses the gains we see everywhere, and it reminds those who might benefit from such gains that they are not quite free." French feminist and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (2009:753) claims that "in woman [...] freedom remains abstract and empty; it cannot

authentically assume itself except in revolt.” Beauvoir and Gqola are both emphasizing the activism role of confronting the status quo, which is one component of the hyphenated phrase, activist-philosopher.

The second term in the phrase, is the philosopher aspect. While, it may be common consensus that a philosopher gains their credentials by being trained in philosophy and attaining a doctorate in philosophy, but if these criteria were applied strictly, few recognized philosophers would meet them. For example, Black Consciousness Movement leader, Steve Biko, is sometimes considered a philosopher, but he does not meet these criteria, given that he was a medical student, training in medicine rather than philosophy. Regarding the doctoral degree criterion, Beauvoir, for example, was trained in philosophy but did not attain a doctorate in the discipline, nor was she a university philosophy professor.

To try and address this impasse, More (2017: 83) argues: “A philosopher is an individual who has the capacity to make an original contribution to the development of philosophical thought and to the world of ideas irrespective of his training in the discipline.” I find this justification plausible, because it seems that philosopher status can be earned through demonstrated, original contribution to philosophy specifically, and more broadly to interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary thought leadership. Thus, an activist-philosopher confronts the status quo through intellectual and philosophical reflection (theory) that is directed towards political and social activism (praxis).

Whereas the account of Nyanzi the activist-philosopher draws significantly from the concepts of Gyekye and Nietzsche, some feminist literature also captures the symbiosis of activism and thought leadership. For example, women who participated in the Fees Must Fall/Rhodes Must Fall Movement against university fee increases and for the decolonisation of education in South Africa, highlighted the symbiosis of rioting (activism) and writing (intellectualism). Student activists Simamkele Dlakavu and Sandy Ndelu (2017) maintained that this approach

of combining theory and praxis would etch the protests and ideas of women in public memory, and history would freeze this rioting and writing in memory as a reference point. Gqola (2001), provides an operational example of the merger of the two activities when she argues for praxis through activism that can also be displayed in academia, while taking on the form of creative expression in media. The thrust of her argument is that the Cartesian dualism that artificially separates theory and praxis should give way to the production of knowledge in multiple textures and spaces (Gqola, 2001:11-12). This ties in with the notions of reconfiguration and re-scripting the body for the dual activities of rioting and writing.

Nyanzi's purported crime was trying to hold the Ugandan president and government accountable to his own campaign promise to provide sanitary pads for girls so that their schooling would not be interrupted when they are menstruating. What is interesting about this debacle is that the authorities deflected attention from the actual problem, reneging on a campaign promise and failed service delivery, and instead attempted to silence her freedom of speech and expression. Nyanzi, like other Ugandan activists, was fighting against misrule and repression in the political sphere on the one hand and for social justice and human rights in the social sphere. Kahyana (2024) maintains that women activists in particular, follow a long tradition of African women who continually fought against injustice dating back to precolonial and colonial times. A further category of activists to which Nyanzi belongs is that of academic activists or activist-academics.

Kariuki, Kratou and Laakso (2022) engage the work of academic activists and explain the linkages between attacks on scholars, decreased academic freedom as well as the stagnation of democracy. They note that attacks at African universities are higher (76 out of 285) than any other regions and elaborate on the work of the Scholars at Risk (SAR) network that tracks attacks on academic freedom at 500 universities in 40 countries and intervene to protect the lives and jobs of at-risk scholars. The attacks include: "killings, disappearances, wrongful imprisonments or detention, prosecutions, restrictions on travel

and retaliatory dismissal, loss of position or expulsion from study” (Kariuki, Kratou & Laakso, 2022:4). Nyanzi’s plight has also been on the radar of SAR and she has received support from the network.

Later sections elaborate on the revolt that leads to the emancipation of the change agent, followed by the re-evaluation of norms, morals and culture and finally, the incorporation of new values and norms. As such, an activist is subversive, non-conforming and rebellious against the status quo and incites revolution, not merely for dismantling, but also for rebuilding. A philosophical activist also facilitates conceptual and theoretical deconstruction and reconstruction of the status quo, and put differently, their activism dismantles and rebuilds, while their philosophy deconstructs and reconstructs.

The following three sections demonstrate that the self-assertive individual and the free spirit are agents of change within their respective socio-cultural and socio-political contexts and are crucial to the development, progress and overall advancement of humankind. Gyekye offers an articulation of the attributes of a change agent – namely self-assertiveness, autonomy and self-determination. Nietzsche provides a three-stage process of emancipation, re-evaluation and incorporation that his free spirit undertakes. Both the attributes and the process combine to theorize the quest of the agent of change. In each of the three subsections, Gyekye’s and Nietzsche’s conceptual frameworks provide the departure and then feminist literature about and by Nyanzi helps to elaborate on the attributes and quest of the change agent. The “self-assertive-free spirit” profile developed by referencing Nyanzi as a case study, is intended as a contribution to theorizing feminist political leadership in Africa.

## **Emancipation**

In *Human, All Too Human* (1910), the first book of the free spirit trilogy, Nietzsche formally introduces us to his free spirit change agents who are the “great minds” (1910:25) that arise from the “great emancipation” (1910:4). He defines them as follows: “We

call that [woman] a *free-thinker who thinks otherwise* [differently] than is expected of [her] in consideration of [her] origin, surroundings, position, and office, or by reason of the prevailing contemporary views” (Nietzsche 1910:209, emphasis added). The free spirit emerges from a culture that is, according to Nietzsche (1910:207), preserved by a common spirit, principles, and faith which are handed down by customs and preserved by strenuous character and habits. The key phrase here is “thinks otherwise”, or differently.

Gyekye (2003:306, emphasis added) also identifies exceptional individuals in the community and refers to them as “*some autonomous, self-assertive individual persons.*” Their self-assertiveness enables them to thoughtfully question and reevaluate “inelegant, undignified, or unenlightened” cultural values and practices (Gyekye 2003:305). It is only through the exercise of their capacity for self-assertion that they can make intelligible, autonomous goals and plans that result in the “creation and historical development of human culture” (Gyekye 1997:54). Much like the free spirit thinks differently from other community members, only *some* members of the African community have the demonstrated capacity to be autonomous, self-determining, self-assertive persons.

Autonomy is defined in feminist literature, similarly in moral psychology or moral philosophy, as “self-government or self-direction”, which describes how one acts based on “motives, reasons, or values that are one’s *own*” (Stoljar, 2024, para. 1). However, Stoljar asserts that the concept was previously considered by feminists to capture a personhood that is masculinist, atomistic, non-emotional, a reasoner – a self that is lone and devoid of social relationships. This critique gave rise to the more attractive term, “relational autonomy,” which reconceptualises autonomy as more socially embedded.

Interestingly, Gyekye’s self-assertive person and Nietzsche’s free spirit each have a different conception of autonomy, which coincides with Stoljar’s distinction between atomistic and relational autonomy. The free spirit and the self-assertive individual have different degrees of proximity to the

community, while they pursue their quests as change agents. The former may distance themselves by detaching from the community to gain the necessary perspective and the latter challenges the status quo while still naturally embedded in communal relationships.

In the case of Nyanzi, she was initially geographically embedded in her community. She conducted her academia and activism in Uganda for years, however, after being imprisoned, she grew apprehensive about her safety and security and that of her three children and thus in January 2022, she relocated to Germany, after she was accepted for a writers-in-exile program. Explaining her choice to go into exile, she was quoted saying: “Because I’m very much a *free-thinking, loud-mouthed, crass woman who boldly speaks her mind*, I think one of the greatest joys is to be able to criticise Museveni’s dictatorship and not fear for my life” (Davies, 2022, para. 3, emphasis added). She has had to flee Uganda, but her commitment to her community continues in exile as she has retained relational autonomy. Moreover, she can still be self-assertive (“criticise Museveni’s dictatorship”), while having the safety and security to be a free spirit (“free-thinking, loud-mouth, crass woman”).

Gyekye (1997:54) adds that the term “autonomy” can be traced to its Greek etymology, meaning: “self-governing” or “self-directing”, in order to achieve self-determination or self-realization. So in his view, autonomy is the pre-requisite of self-determination, which is also associated to self-realization. Self-determination usually describes matters of political independence or sovereignty, nation-state-building, and nationalism or ethnicity, which allude to collective actions. After the emancipation from conformity, the free spirit develops a drive for self-determination. In other words, their self-determination may be met with the kind of resistance discussed in the section above on the activist-philosopher.

More than a dangerous drive for self-determination, very often it is an ambivalent and contradictory journey as found by one of the women founding members of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), Dr. Mamphela Ramphele. She highlights

that even when there is an intellectual appreciation of gender equity issues, it is often difficult to translate it into behavioural changes on the part of both men and women (Yates *et al.*, 1998: 91). In fact, she makes the uncomfortable acknowledgement that women at times perpetuate inequality. This happens particularly when it comes to the household domain, where they enjoy being admired for the responsibilities that they carry as caregivers of men and children and as such, they have a measure of self-determination within certain parameters and with limitations.

Nancy Hirschmann (2006:209) in her conception of feminist freedom notes that women at times participate in structures of power and oppression, which make other choices and activities possible. Her point is that both women and men participate in patriarchy and so some women may perpetuate masculine laws, rules and regulations if they perceive any benefit from them. The cofounder of the Bantu Women's League, Charlotte Maxeke, as early as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, criticized how women were fixed in a timeless past of tradition and domestication (April, 2012: 3). Ramphele adds that one of the dividends they received was a form of agency and autonomy in the domestic sphere (in Yates *et al.*, 1998:92).

Gqola refers to this self-sabotaging role that black women assumed, as the "cult of femininity." She explains that in contemporary times, decades after the peak of the BCM in the 1970's, there is now a "women empowerment" movement that applies mainly to women that have assumed occupation in the public sphere. The private and household domain that Ramphele refers to, however, remains largely gender conservative. Gqola explains the cult of femininity as follows:

"A completely different set of rules, framed in direct contradiction to the ostensible 'women's empowerment' discourse continues to govern the 'private' world of the home, and other spaces in between: public transport, the streets, clubs, restaurants, shebeens, etc. Outside of work, the dominant gender-talk is that women must adhere to very limiting notions of femininity. The recycling of the 'cult of femininity' takes place across sectors, as public

culture demonstrates. Indeed, it is so pervasive that it retains high visibility amongst the ranks of ostensibly 'highly empowered' women. In interview after media interview, the question is posed to economically powerful women, 'who are you really?' Thus, pressure is applied to prove that they exhibit traditionally feminine traits, in other words, that as powerful as such women are at work, they submit to the patriarchal 'cult of femininity' elsewhere, illustrating that South African media are as much a product of this society as they are of a global late-capitalist patriarchal order" (Gqola, 2007:116).

It is evident from the passage above that the cult of femininity is so well constructed that it operates in both traditional and progressive female spaces and thus emancipation is the first stage of the quest of a change agent. Many customs, traditions, roles and practices in a given culture are millennia, centuries or decades old and resistant to change and progress and a radical change in thinking or mentality is required to overcome the psychological pull of the prevailing cultures. One such prevailing norm in radical communitarianism holds that the individual is defined according to the environing community and so their essential, physical or psychological characteristics are subordinated to the communal ethos (Menkiti, 1984).

Feminism confronts many of these intractable aspects of culture, particularly in terms of how they inform gender relations. African feminism attempts to retrieve what was lost, retain what is useful and challenge what is harmful within African culture, for the sake of the common good and societal progress. Nietzsche speaks of the possibility of progress only on condition that ancient (error based) culture should be forsaken. He maintains that this will happen when people, "*consciously* resolve to develop themselves towards a new culture; whilst formerly they only developed unconsciously and by chance" (Nietzsche, 1910:39), emphasis original).

Nyanzi, has demonstrated consistently that she is emancipated from those parameters and defines her own scope of autonomy, due to her self-assertive and free spirit

traits. Keguro Macharia (2016:188) claims that Nyanzi displays “a certain African genius for waywardness” that at times “accumulates odd stories, little moments, folksy wisdom, and seemingly disconnected anecdotes.” However, she goes on to claim that this waywardness is not particularly “interested in forging new paths that others can follow” (Macharia, 2016:188). I think that the notion of waywardness could be linked to my earlier discussions about rebellion. While Macharia claims that the endeavour is not necessarily to forge new paths, in the case of the activist-philosophers, when they rebel, they do so not to pursue disorder or lawlessness for its own sake. The stories, wisdom and anecdotes that they accumulate contribute to the entire enterprise or quest of forging a new way of life for themselves and others. The radical nature and inclinations of the self-assertive-free-spirit *emancipate* them from conformity to the prevailing traditions, culture and morality of their societies. Emancipation is the first stage of change agent’s quest and the same could apply to an African feminist political leader, activist or thinker.

### **Re-evaluation**

In the second book of the free spirit trilogy, *Daybreak* (1995), Nietzsche’s free spirit repudiates the very moral fibre of the community. Nietzsche initially addresses what he considers to be the irrational origins of morality by questioning the legitimacy of things, just because they are enduring (such as culture, customs and tradition). He argues that these legacies are so saturated with reason that they seem probable, even if they are not based on facts or truths. He asks whether something is right just because it is prevailing. For Nietzsche, morality is nothing more than obedience to customs, which are based on traditional ways of behaving and evaluating. In other words, things are not inherently moral or not, but are given more weight based on how long people subscribe to them and thus following these moral precepts is sometimes an irrational obedience to higher authority because it is commanded, not because it is useful. Hence the need for re-evaluation.

Gyekye also points out some features that he considers to be negative in African culture and require re-evaluation. Interestingly, in the preface of his book *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (1997), he highlights the resistance towards science and technology by Africans, as well as the clinging to harmful traditions of social and moral practices that should be eradicated – such as the inheritance system. By raising the problem of the traditional inheritance system, Gyekye's and Nyanzi's concerns coincide as she also does work on widow inheritance (see Nyanzi, Emodu-Walakira & Serwaniko, 2006). He cautions that while some aspects of Western modernity may not be appropriate for non-western societies and cultures, a critical reinterpretation and re-evaluation of inherited cultural traditions is still necessary.

Essentially, both Nietzsche and Gyekye are concerned about the stagnation of the community or society's progress due to traditions, customs and cultures that no longer serve people. The critical and contemplative thinking of change agents enables them to *re-evaluate* the customs, practices and rules of their communities. Gyekye proposes a means to reconcile what should be rejected and retained during the process of re-evaluation:

“This critical re-evaluation of a received cultural tradition will not only suggest refinement or appropriate amendment that, in the name of renewal and revitalization, ought to be made to it but also direct attention to the aspects of it that, in the name of progress and success, ought to be expunged from the cultural life and thought of a people. It is, remember, this critical reinterpretation and re-evaluation that will also lead to the euphoric affirmation of the abiding worth of what can truly be acknowledged as positive features of the values of a cultural tradition” (Gyekye, 1997:263).

Whereas Nietzsche's free spirit leans towards repudiating the morals of society and going back to the drawing board, Gyekye's self-assertive person attempts the dialectical process of resolving conflicting interests by beginning with the thesis, introducing

the antithesis and finally bringing about a synthesis. Nyanzi's quest follows the process of the free spirit – emancipation, re-evaluation, incorporation – however like the self-assertive person, it balances the communalistic and individualistic features. In her dual role as an activist-philosopher, her re-evaluation activities include challenging traditional morality, contributing to discourse on freedom of speech and expression and contributing to scientific knowledge, empirical information and epistemology through research and scholarship.

As a prominent advocate and activist for the LGBTQI+ community, she is often criticised by moral conservatives, while she is in turn critical towards their discrimination and prejudices. In the months leading up to the promulgation of the Ugandan anti-homosexuality law, Nyanzi spoke with Danson Kahyana (2023) about the impending implications and consequences. Kahyana (2023:44) firstly notes that the law is framed as a defence against Western values that are attempting to corrupt African morality, pandering to the Muslim leaders, Christian churches and traditionalists that he hopes will support his presidential bid in 2026. Secondly, Nyanzi adds that the bills are intended to criminalise sexualities while claiming to protect African values but finds that this is an absurd claim because “Before colonialism... Africa embraced different sexualities like polygyny, polygamy and polyandry, to mention but a few. The view that Africa has always had one form of sexuality is ahistorical and a figment of the imagination” (Kahyana & Nyanzi, 2023:44). Thirdly, Nyanzi names a cluster of other repressive laws like the Public Order Management Act (2013), the Computer Misuse Act (2011), the Anti-Pornography Act (2014), the NonGovernmental Organisations Act (2016) and the Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act (2022) that also criminalise dissent (Kahyana & Nyanzi, 2023:45).

When Ugandan President, Museveni signed the stringent anti-LGBTQ law on 29 May 2023, which includes capital punishment for so-called “aggravated homosexuality” and a 20-year prison sentence for “promoting” homosexuality, Nyanzi's official response was, “Cry beloved Uganda, cry for this sad day for the rights of LGBTIQ+ people and their

allies. La luta continua!” (Reuters, 30 May 2023). Nyanzi’s criticism of the government’s treatment of feminized and queer people using the mechanism of radical rudeness that disrupts existing social systems has resulted in intimidation, violence and imprisonment (Rodriguez, 2022:36). Her work focuses on sexuality, gender, culture and power and her own life intersected with these themes when she was imprisoned and due to hostile treatment and lack of ante-natal care, she tragically suffered a miscarriage.

As a scholar, one of the most significant contributions made by Nyanzi to the body of knowledge is an integrated understanding of sex and sexuality. She proposes a more nuanced, complex definition of sexuality that captures a range of meanings made by various groups (Marais, 2019). Specifically, Nyanzi asserts that:

“This definition of sexuality should also not merely be situated within the body and involve bodily functions, but it should embrace: desire, the erotic, emotions, sensuality, fantasy, intimacy, commitment, power, relationship, negotiation, exploration, exploitation, expression, trust, personhood, belonging, identity, pleasure, entertainment, consumption, obligation, transaction, dependence, work, income, resistance, abuse, masculine entitlement, feminine propriety, respectability, spirituality, custom and ritual” (Nyanzi, 2011:48).

The spark that ignited the social media debacle that ultimately resulted in Nyanzi’s arrest was the #Pads4GirlsUg campaign in 2017 which publicised the plight of menstrual hygiene and period product poverty. While the advocacy may have challenged unwarranted taboos associated with this very natural aspect of womanhood, it antagonized powerful figures in government and challenged patriarchal stereotypes (Mutsvairoa *et al.*, 2021). Soon there was tremendous cultural and political backlash from the Ugandan government. Nyanzi (2020:555) asserts that the campaign was criticised blatantly by the First Lady and Minister of Education, Janet Museveni, on a television interview, for offering menstrual education to both girls and boys. Rather than

apologize that her husband did not deliver on his presidential campaign promise to provide pads to girls, she deflected attention to Nyanzi's radical rudeness. Moreover, Rosemary Nansubuga Seninde, a Member of Parliament and Minister of State for Primary Education in Uganda, insisted that menstruation cannot be discussed publicly as it is taboo and should be a secret, claiming that is the culture of Buganda (Nyanzi, 2020:555). Nyanzi reflects on the divisive debate that this issue caused:

“These attempts to shame and denigrate our provision of menstrual education to students generated debates within Uganda. Rather than align themselves with sensitization and public education about menstrual issues, it was disheartening that many powerful public officials adopted moralizing tones steeped deep in cultural shaming, taboo and secrecy. Many public officials criticized our education methods and processes—claiming (correctly) that we were breaking social norms and abusing cultural taboos which they claim forbid the discussion of menstruation outside the intimate circles of paternal aunts and their nieces” (Nyanzi, 2020:556).

In an article titled “The Political Force of the Comedic” Webber *et al.* (2021) note that Nyanzi uses satirical humour to challenge the coercive power of Uganda's President Museveni. Even though she is known to be a feminist activist and prolific researcher, it appears that her profane, often vulgar protests and her irreverent, unrepentant attitude toward authority have become her “claim to fame” (Webber *et al.*, 2021: 428). This genre of political humour is aimed at expressing opposition, establishing political subjectivity and bolstering civic support’ (Davis *et al.*, 2018: 3905 in Webber *et al.*, 2021:428). This new vehicle or means of protest has become alarming to many political leaders and according to Sebeelo (2020), the Nyanzi case has shone a light on the ambivalence about social media across African countries, pertaining to freedom of speech.

In the wake of Nyanzi's imprisonment, another social media campaign caught the attention of Ugandan law enforcement in February 2020. Sheena Bagaine, a university

student, utilized her online space for anonymous women to name and shame perpetrators of sexual violence. She was subsequently accused by one of the alleged perpetrators of cyberstalking, cyber harassment and offensive communication – the same charges levelled against Nyanzi. Hernández (2022:101) highlights that “in both cases, the Computer Misuse Act (2011) was used to justify the detentions, which, beyond contextual differences, punished a similar offence: That of upsetting the status quo.” The fear imposed by these laws affects the personal capacity of women to challenge sexist social norms not only at the highest levels but also in their closest environments (Hernández, 2022: 101). Both Nyanzi and Bagaine were rebelling against the status quo, not merely for dismantling but also for rebuilding. Nyanzi as philosophical activist, also engages in conceptual and theoretical deconstruction and reconstruction of the status quo. Thus her activism dismantles and rebuilds, while her philosophy deconstructs and reconstructs.

## **Incorporation**

Both the philosophers that I engage claim that exceptional individuals have the capacity, ability and intellectual acuity to experiment, research and cultivate new knowledge that inspires communal development and progress. The third instalment of Nietzsche’s trilogy, *The Gay Science* (1974), speaks of an alternative means of knowledge generation through the adoption of scientific enquiry and experimentation as a way of life, rather than continuing to accept perpetuated error without question. The free spirit is tasked with incorporating the newfound knowledge that issues from their experiments and filtering it into society until it becomes instinctive for all (Nietzsche, 1974:85). In this way, the free spirit is the pioneer of a new age of thought. The ultimate goal of free spirits is that:

“We... want to become those we are – human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves. To that end we must become the best learners and discoverers of everything that is lawful and necessary in the world: we must become physicists

in order to become creators in this sense – while hitherto all valuations and ideals have been based on ignorance of physics or were constructed so as to contradict it” (Nietzsche, 1974:266).

In this passage Nietzsche is outlining the entire progression of emancipation, re-evaluation and incorporation that informs my case study. He affirms that this process is meant to facilitate the exercise of free will. Nietzsche’s free spirit becomes who they are when they possess the underlying value of autonomy because exceptional individuals give themselves laws and create themselves. This value of autonomy has already been discussed in the section on emancipation, based on Gyekye’s definition of the attributes of the self-assertive person. Ann Mullin (2000:393-394), adds that a free spirit has the talent or capacity to assimilate the old with the new; to simplify the complex in order to enhance growth and power; to know what to digest and to not digest. This aligns with Gyekye’s explanation of how synthesis between the old and new occurs during the re-evaluation stage.

Gyekye’s self-assertive individual is also a bearer of new knowledge, laws and values that arise from their pursuit of progress and advancement within the context of African communitarianism. They have the innate ability to align individual and community responsibilities in a way that fosters the common good. Their autonomy affords them the latitude to attend to their personal and individual needs, as well as to make independent evaluations and choices (Gyekye, 2002:306). Such individual responsibility demands that, through self-attention, they exert themselves and strive “to attain some appropriate status socially, economically, intellectually, and so on” (Gyekye, 2002:311-312). It is their duty to develop their natural abilities in order to attain their goals, and to become influential so that their quest makes an impact. If we suggest that the third stage of the change agent’s quest is incorporating newfound knowledge from experimentation, assimilating the old with the new, and attaining some appropriate social and intellectual status to disseminate the knowledge, let’s consider how Nyanzi has achieved this. She describes herself as a knowledge

producer, bearing “three identities: academic, poet and activist” (Akbaş & Seeland, 2023:80). In social media parlance, one could also add that she is a social media content creator and digital media activist.

As an academic, the topics and themes of her academic output of books, articles, research and public intellectual commentary exhibit what many conservative African leaders and community members would consider to be “immoral.” In this respect, Nietzsche (1995:10) reassures us that: “The free human being is immoral because in all things [she] is determined to depend upon [herself] and not upon a tradition.” Examples of Nyanzi’s free spirit in this respect are her writings (some in collaboration with other scholars) about contentious topics such as state-sponsored homophobia (2015), queer pride and protest (2014), elderly widows’ sexuality (2011), male promiscuity (2009), the dangers of African ritual sex (2008), the respectability and personhood of women in the context of HIV/AIDS politics (2007), widow inheritance (2006), abortion (2005), the transactional sexual practices of Gambian “beach boys” (2005), market women (2005) and sexual relationships among school pupils (2001) among many related topics. She provides rigorous scientific and empirical evidence for her claims and arguments, which at times is unpalatable in the African cultural context. Gyekye raises the concern that Africans hold various misconceptions about science and its utility. His greater concern is that Africa will continue to lag behind the global community and have its material growth stunted if it does not “engage in sustained investigations and to provide intelligible scientific explanations or analyses of their own observations and experiences” (Gyekye, 1997:244).

Nyanzi the poet is a revelation! Not only is her radical thinking conveyed through her scholarship; she is also an advocate for freedom of speech and expression, which she practices through the resistance strategy of “radical rudeness,” that aims to disrupt conservative norms (Makoni, 2021). Her poems and social media posts are the sites for much of her radical rudeness. Her poetry and other writings were smuggled out of prison by among others, the Ubuntu Reading Group and so

her story was shared and disseminated in real time (Rodriguez, 2022). Nyanzi is situated among other notable authors who were imprisoned for their dissent, such as Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1947) and North American radical philosopher George Jackson (1970). They are part of “a long lineage of writers that have challenged dominant regimes and articulated the necessity of otherwise possible worlds” and who “articulate the zeitgeist of socio-political movements by locating additional battlegrounds for organizing” (Janak, 2021: 7).

After her release, in September 2022, she embarked on a book tour in Kenya after her prolific output of three poetry books in three consecutive years – *No Roses From My Mouth* (2020), which was written while she was in prison; *Don't Come in My Mouth: Poems That Rattled Uganda* (2021); and *Eulogies of My Mouth Poems For A Poisoned Uganda* (2022). Webber *et al.* (2021: 427) argue that satirical critique, such as that employed by Nyanzi, particularly in her poetry, needs to be intelligible for it to be politically efficacious and its intelligibility depends on the stylistic form of its presentation. The self-assertive change agent is usually articulate and demonstrates an ability to eloquently convey their thoughts in a way that engenders action.

In her third identity as an activist, Nyanzi has garnered both notoriety and acclaim. At times activism and protest may have unintended consequences such as civil unrest or carnage. On the other hand, knowledge produced in the intellectual or academic domains may be misunderstood, or make no impression at all. Moreover, Nyanzi's defiant disrobing protest was dismissed by many traditionalists and conservatives as a clear display of moral decay. So, if one views her conduct through a conservative African lens, it could be argued that her questioning and evaluation of the culture, tradition, customs and norms may fail the test of intelligibility. Conversely, from among the global community that understands the theory and praxis captured in her academic output, her poetry and her radical rudeness device, she has received tremendous support for her brave defiance of authoritarianism, patriarchy, sexism and homophobia.

The extension of her activism to digital platforms is often cited as an example of the new era of digital humanists, and according to Ross (2021), Nyanzi's story, which I refer to as her quest, serves two purposes. Firstly, she stands in the present that needs reshaping, while reconsidering old genealogies and imagining new futures, by entertaining the counter narratives of the most oppressed (Ross, 2021:486). This idea echoes my earlier discussions of the counter publics mentioned by Gqola, which are constructed and established by feminist theorists. This also speaks to the stage of re-evaluation where the activist-philosopher has the dual task of dismantling and rebuilding, deconstructing and reconstructing. Secondly, one encounters the shadow of this endeavour, where digital activity can be surveilled, and digital tools can be used to silence dissidents and consequently, activists can be harmed (Ross, 2021:486).

Unlike Nietzsche's lone and atomic free spirit, Nyanzi emulates the more socially connected self-assertive change agent of Gyekye's community. She is an example of relational autonomy. She recognises that this quest cannot be borne by any single individual, and so Nyanzi continually prompts future research and activism, asking two questions: "how can knowledge producers deal with such challenges, and how can queer knowledge contribute to society as a whole?" (Akbaş & Seeland, 2023:80). Nyanzi is grappling with these questions and more and her book chapter "Queering Queer Africa" (2014) proposes a new paradigm of African queerness by offering an alternative framework for understanding gendered subjectivities, in the context of the breadth and interconnectedness of people's lives. In this respect, she asserts:

"[The] canvas of possibilities demanding queer production of knowledge from Africa includes relationships, pleasure, intimacy, parenthood, education, voice and expression, representation and visibility, housing and shelter, movement, migration, exile and asylum, employment, income generation, livelihoods, family, ritual, health, spirituality, religion, faith, violence, security and safety,

nationalism, ethnicity, and globalization” (Nyanzi, 2014: 63).

Heeding Nyanzi’s call for queer knowledge production, Spronk and Nyeck (2021:389) determine to “calibrate the study of gender and sexuality as part and parcel of people’s everyday lives rather than following the grid of a global LGBT+ discourse” that attributes intrinsic psychic traits to people. Oudenhuisen (2021) concurs and adds that because desires are multiple and include family bonds, queering should extend beyond the domain of sexuality. This approach makes a clear connection between theory and praxis by “studying sexuality as it emerges from people’s daily vagaries and fortunes” and formulating theoretical repertoires that incorporate incompleteness, sociality and relatedness (Spronk & Nyeck, 2021: 389). The new knowledge that Nyanzi is contributing and incorporating to this discourse is the notion that same-sex and cross-sex lives are intimately connected and so, sexuality does not necessarily form one’s core identity, to the exclusion of all other human attributes and experiences. The scope of her contributions touch on numerous, multidimensional and crucial aspects society, as her oeuvre of her thought, speech, and actions demonstrates.

## Conclusion

This chapter was aimed at theorizing the activities of change agents who are crucial to the development, progress and overall advancement of humankind, within their respective socio-cultural and socio-political contexts. The description of two kinds of exceptional individuals – Kwame Gyekye’s self-assertive person and Nietzsche’s free spirit – who play this catalytic role, demonstrates that even though they come from different contexts (African and Western, respectively), their attributes and quests show remarkable similarities. This comparative analysis offered the building blocks for a framework that was used to conduct a case study of Dr. Stella Nyanzi, a change agent and an example of both Gyekye’s and Nietzsche’s exceptional person.

The dominant *attributes* of the change agent are outlined by Gyekye’s as self-assertiveness, autonomy and self-

determination, which collectively characterize the self-assertive person. Nietzsche's offers a three-stage *process* of emancipation, re-evaluation and incorporation, which captures the activities or process of the change agent. Both the attributes and the process combine to theorize the quest of the agent of change. Each of the three subsections initially outlined Gyekye's and Nietzsche's conceptual frameworks, and then engaged feminist literature about and by Nyanzi to elaborate on the attributes and process of the change agent.

The intersection of the two philosopher's conceptions of extraordinary individuals provides us with the concept of the "self-assertive-free-spirit." The concept can be consolidated into the title or mantle of an "activist-philosopher," which captures the change agent's intellectual and philosophical reflection (theory), that is directed towards political and social activism (praxis). Regarding the profile of the activist-philosopher, they are inherently rebellious in thought and practice as they revolt against the status quo to establish counter publics, which advance counter-narratives. By definition, their philosopher title means that they have the capacity to make original contributions to the interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary the world of ideas, even if they are not formally trained in philosophy. They pair rioting (activism) and writing (theorising) to reconfigure, rescript and revolutionize their societies.

This framework contributes to feminist meditations on women's political leadership in Africa by demonstrating the dual tasks of dismantling and building, deconstruction and reconstruction, in thought leadership and activism. Women and feminist political leaders enter the political arena whether through direct, participatory or representative democracy and are usually confronted with the status quo that is inherently patriarchal, paternalistic and sexist, and in need of re-evaluation. In contradistinction to Nyanzi, some women ally themselves with patriarchy and male leaders for various kinds of benefit, such as Museveni's wife and Seninde, when they denounced the #Pads4GirlsUg campaign. This dynamic was highlighted by Ramphele, one of the women leaders of the Black

Consciousness Movement, as well as Gqola, when she speaks of the self-sabotaging “cult of femininity” phenomenon. As such, even if women political leaders may enjoy some autonomy and self-determination, this relative freedom could still be within certain parameters and limitations, imposed or chosen.

The first stage of the quest undertaken by the self-assertive-free-spirit agent of change is emancipation from the culture. Gyekye defines the emancipated self-assertive person as autonomous and self-determining, and highlights that it is only some members of the community who have the combination of these attributes. Nietzsche states that a free spirit is a free thinker, who thinks differently to their origins, surroundings and prevailing contemporary views. They both have the attribute of autonomy, however the free spirit has a more atomistic approach, while the self-assertive person practices relational autonomy. Like Nyanzi, women’s and feminist leadership in Africa rests on an underlying communal ethos, which embraces both the communalistic and individualistic characteristic of the person, as highlighted by Gyekye. However, one of the dangers of subversion against the government is state retaliation as experienced by Nyanzi through intimidation, harassment, imprisonment and death threats. As a result, despite her loyalty to her community she had to go into exile.

The second stage of the quest of the self-assertive-free-spirit is their re-evaluation of the culture. They grapple with traditions, customs, morality, and norms. According to Gyekye, they evaluate inelegant, undignified, or unenlightened cultural values, and Nietzsche claims that they can recognize the increased stupidity that is often required for cultural conformity and stability. They question the legitimacy of practices that are adhered to because they are enduring, not because they are useful. They interrogate irrational obedience to higher authority. Nyanzi’s confrontations with Museveni and Ugandan political leadership are an apt example of a free-thinking, free-speaking, free spirit. As an activist-philosopher, re-evaluation is part of the academic, research, scholarship and knowledge generation enterprise. The challenge encountered with the re-evaluation process is determining what needs to be revised, retained or

rejected. Nyanzi highlights vulnerabilities, discriminations, and oppressions suffered by sections of the society who are marginalized or non-conformist. In response she speaks truth to power, in support of various social justice causes.

The third and final stage of the self-assertive-free-spirit's quest is to *incorporate* what they have discovered or formulated from their evaluative activities. An appropriate way to explain this stage of the change agent's journey is with reference to Nietzsche's assertion that the free spirit becomes who they are – new, unique and incomparable. This speaks to an authenticity that is cultivated from *emancipation*. This authenticity is about individual transformation, which is foundational to becoming a student of the world, a discover of what the world needs, and an advocate of what the world should become – which speaks to the stage of *re-evaluation*. Finally, one carries the mantle of a physicist and creator who is adept at constructing a new society based on new valuations and ideals – which is the *incorporation* function. The case study of Dr. Stella Nyanzi the academic, poet and activist captures this three-stage quest, where she courageously defies authoritarianism, patriarchy, sexism and homophobia; while maintaining a connection between theory and praxis, as she formulates new theoretical repertoires that reflect lived experience.

Overall, this chapter supplements the usual historical documentation of the catalytic role that some individuals play in the evolution of their societies, by offering a theoretical understanding of certain common attributes and activities of these exceptional individuals. The chapter also demonstrated that exceptional individuals are not merely fictional ideal types and so, African women leaders and feminists can be catalysts and change agents in their societies if they are self-assertive, autonomous, self-determining and embark on the quest of emancipation, re-evaluation and incorporation. The “self-assertive-free spirit” profile developed by referencing Nyanzi as a case study, could be true of many other agents of change, in various societal contexts. A “self-assertive-free-spirit” is an ideal candidate for feminist political leadership in Africa.

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