

Stella Nyanzi: A digital biography

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This chapter contributes to the volume's focus on exploring intellectual biographies in African studies with a biographical sketch of Ugandan intellectual and political activist Stella Nyanzi. In this chapter I propose a new biographical approach that I term "digital biography", whereby online writings and activity make up the main biographical resource for the biographer. I illustrate this approach through my own digital biography of Stella Nyanzi that has consisted in organizing select, online texts (mainly Facebook posts and Tweets) written over ten years, into a coherent literary corpus, which I have thematically divided into three chronological periods: grief and growing activism (2014-2016); trials, arrests and prison (2017-2019) and running for office and exile (2020-2024). In this chapter I draw on this digital archive, as well as on three other research sources: an extended interview I conducted with Stella in October 2022 in Ferrara, Italy, a short film I made of Stella together with Juri Mazumdar of Juri & Aki films, which was shot in Munich in November 2023, and her published poetry book *No Roses from My Mouth* (2020). I draw on these sources to paint a biographical sketch of one of the most influential figures in Uganda's contemporary political history, showing how her personal and professional experiences have informed her politics, as well as her intellectual and poetic production.

Key words: Uganda, Stella Nyanzi, digital politics, digital activism, radical rudeness

1. Introduction¹

Stella Nyanzi is without a doubt one of the most influential political activists in Uganda's contemporary political history. She is also among the most—if not *the* most—influential digital presences in Uganda's political history, being one of the first activists in the country to make use of Facebook and Twitter (now called X) so prominently and so effectively for her political activities.

¹ My research and film on Stella Nyanzi were all realized under the ERC Consolidator Grant: "Philosophy and Genre: Creating a Textual Basis for African Philosophy" (PhiGe) headed by Professor Alena Rettová at the University of Bayreuth.

Because of Stella Nyanzi's unique use of digital texts, digital platforms and digital mediums in the political sphere, I would cast her as an inaugural figure of Ugandan's digipolitical age, whereby with the term digipolitical I refer to Favarato's theorization of the concept as the "digitally infused, techno-mediated rendition of the political" (Favarato 2025).² According to a 2019 source, Stella Nyanzi had the largest social media following of any Ugandan (Serunkuma 2019), while another source points to the fact that her live-streamed nude protest at Makerere University in 2016 became one of the highest trending stories on social media that year (Tamale 2016). The impact of Nyanzi's use of digital channels and platforms to voice dissent, carry out protest and convey powerful political messages is evidenced by her tortuous journey through the Ugandan criminal justice system, culminating in her exile to Germany in 2022.

According to Kenyan scholar Nanjala Nyambola—one of earliest theorists of the new brand of digitally infused politics we are now experiencing globally—the watershed moment of digital politics in East Africa (and perhaps even more broadly, in sub-Saharan Africa) was the 2017 general election in Kenya, which entailed a massive investment in IT infrastructure for voter identification and result transmission and the involvement of the controversial data analytics firm Cambridge Analytica (Nyambola 2018).³ In her book *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics*, Nyambola skillfully illustrates the double edged power of new digital technologies, which were used by those in power for political control and voter manipulation in the 2017 Kenyan election, while at the same time also embraced by Kenyan citizens as channels of free information and emancipatory politics, as "online forums opened up a new space for political discourse in Kenya that was being stifled in the traditional media and offline society" (Nyambola 2018: 27).

If the 2017 election marks the beginning of the Kenyan digipolitical age, I would argue that Uganda's digipolitical age begins with the legal charges against Stella Nyanzi for 'cyber harassment' and 'offensive communication' under sections 24 and 25 of the Computer Misuse Act 2011 in relation to a Facebook poem she posted on January 27, 2017, in which she referred to the President of Uganda as *matako butako*, meaning a pair of buttocks. The poem was written in anger against the government's

² Favarato's definition of the digipolitical also includes the aspect of post anthropocentrism, but as this is not an aspect I focus on in this paper, I have omitted this third feature of the digipolitical from the quotation, focusing instead on the digital infusion and techno mediation of the political.

³ Cambridge Analytica (CA) was a British political consulting firm involved in a scandal involving the personal data of up to 87 million Facebook users that was obtained without their consent for targeted political advertising.

failure to provide sanitary pads for schoolgirls, which had been a NRM (National Resistance Movement) campaign promise in the run up to the 2016 presidential elections.⁴

In November 2018 she was again charged with the same offense, for another Facebook poem she had posted on September 16, the day after President's Museveni's seventy-fourth birthday, in which she insulted not only the President but also his mother, Esiteri, for birthing him. She remained in custody until her hearing on August 1, 2019, when the Buganda Road Magistrate Court convicted her of cyber harassment while acquitting her of offensive communication. The following day, she was sentenced to 18 months in prison—reduced by nine months due to her time in pretrial detention—to be served at the maximum-security facility Luzira Women's Prison in Kampala.⁵

After serving sixteen months in prison, she was finally released on February 20, 2020, when a High Court Judge overturned the 2018 charges against her, stating that Dr Nyanzi had been denied a fair hearing by the magistrate's court and that it had also ruled beyond its jurisdiction, thereby winning her appeal.

After losing the municipal election as the Kampala Woman Representative and suffering a series of threats directed to herself, her campaign manager and her lover, Stella moved to Kenya for a while before finally accepting the offer of a three-year writers in exile programme run by PEN Germany and relocated to Munich with her three children in January 2022.⁶

2. Writing Stella's biography

My first 'encounter' with Stella dates back to the first rainy season of 2017.⁷ I was offered a three-month affiliation as a Visiting Research Associate with the prestigious Makerere Institute for Social Research (MISR), where Stella was among the first Research Fellows hired by the new MISR Director Mahmood Mamdani. I was given Stella's office for the duration of my visiting period, in the basement area of the main MISR building. I did not encounter her face to face on that occasion, and my contact with her was

⁴ NRM is the name of Ugandan's ruling party, which has been in power under the leadership of Yoweri Kaguta Museveni since 1986.

⁵ American Bar Association, Center for Human Right, Uganda v. Stella Nyanzi, February 2020.

⁶ PEN International was founded in London, UK, in 1921. The acronym PEN originally stood for 'Poets, Essayists, Novelists' and was later broadened to 'Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, Novelists.' Today it operates across five continents in over 90 countries, with 130 Centres supporting unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations. To learn more about PEN see: <https://www.pen-international.org/who-we-are>.

⁷ Uganda's climate is largely tropical with two rainy seasons per year, March to May and September to December.

limited to the red paint strokes of her April 18, 2016 nude protest, which still vividly marked the walls of the building and of her office.

It was not until 2022 that I met Stella in person, in the course of a guest lecture she delivered at the University of Bayreuth, where I was employed as a postdoc researcher tasked with writing a book on African philosophy and digital genres.⁸ We exchanged numbers and in October of that year I met her in Ferrara at the festival of my favourite Italian magazine, *Internazionale*, where she had been invited to give a talk on LGBT+ activism.

I was able to conduct a long interview with her in Ferrara, which helped guide my excavation work into her colossal social media digital archive. Creating a coherent narrative from an infinity of tweets and posts has been the great challenge of this research project, due to the sheer quantities of textual production that are enabled by digital mediums. The daunting nature of this task is actually what brought on the intellectual biography as a practical methodological tool to help demarcate a narrative terrain across the vast seas of Stella Nyanzi's digital production. I did this by reading her posts and tweets against a chronology of key dates and key offline events that Stella herself highlighted as having important reverberations onto her online presence and her digital writings:

My father died in 2014, 2015 my mother died, 2016 we lost the election...2016 Mamdani also happened ... 2017 I went to jail, 2018 I went to jail, 2019 I was in jail, 2021 I ran for election, 2022 I did exile...so all my life on Facebook is kind of marked by these events.⁹

On the basis of our Ferrara interview, I was thus able to weave a thematic and chronological sequence across her digital textual production, demarcating three main biographical periods of the last ten years of her life: grief and growing activism (2014-2016); trials, arrests and prison (2017-2019) and running for office and exile (2020-2024).

In this article I present selections from my digital biography of Stella Nyanzi, focusing only on the first biographical period, that of grief and growing activism, due to space limitations. I here propose a reading of select texts from this period in close connection with excerpts from the 2022 interview in Ferrara and from the 2023 filmed interview in Munich, in the course of which Stella so graciously shared episodes of her life and her original and bold thoughts about womanhood, motherhood, politics, feminism, power, life, death and love.

⁸ This is my current book project provisionally entitled *Digital Intellectuals. Fighting for Freedom in Uganda*, of which this chapter is a part of.

⁹ Interview with Stella Nyanzi, October 1, 2022, Ferrara (Italy).

3. Grief and growing activism (2014-2016)

I have chosen to begin Stella Nyanzi's digital biography in the year 2014 because it is the year that I believe contains the two major events that shaped all of her subsequent political activism: the signing into law of the Anti-Homosexuality Act and the untimely death of her father due to inaccess to proper medical treatment upon suffering a heart attack. It is also the year she turned forty, an event she celebrated with enthusiasm in a beautiful Facebook poem that she posted on the day of her birthday:

Today I am turning forty years old
with my own Ipsum Car-keys jingling in my hand,
my three babies on my broad black back,
my dreadlocked head has the PhD from London,
my name confirmed in the service of Uganda's oldest university,
my wardrobe full of long three-piece bitengis,
my fourth passport nearly full of cross-border stamps,
my heart: fool of a loveless marriage to an estranged man,
my life full of love from doting parents, three sincere sisters and a few firm friends,
my faith in religion is at a healthy place of querying dogma,
my spirituality is wholesome with eclectic belief,
my right ear-lobe has six holes while my left has just two,
and my forty-year-old body still boasts no tatoo.

Today I am turning forty years old
without enough cash in the bank - the story of my life!
I still have to learn how to save and invest!
I still have to pay off my three remaining debts!
I still have to learn to bake, cook and fry!
I still have to resume my building project!
I still have to start gardening flowers or an orchard of succulent fruit and spicy herbs!
I still have to complete my first monograph!
I still have to brave my first pap smear!
I still have to build regular exercise into my lifestyle!
I still have to learn to stop working without taking a break!
I still have to start dance classes, start dance classes, start dance classes!
I still have to learn how to live well, love deep and laugh much.¹⁰

¹⁰ Facebook post, June 16, 2014.

In the fifth line of the poem, Stella is celebrating her recent appointment as Research Fellow at MISR, where she was hired with an ethnographic research project that analysed the ways in which Anti-Homosexuality laws were affecting the everyday lives of LGBTQIA+ persons in Uganda. Stella had already done research work on sexualities for her PhD in Medical Anthropology at the London School of Tropical Hygiene, with a thesis on ‘Negotiating scripts for meaningful sexuality an ethnography of youths in the Gambia’ (2008). Upon completing her PhD, she had returned home to Uganda where she was employed at the Makerere School of Law by Professor Sylvia Tamale to work on the *African Sexualities Reader* (2011).

Ever since her doctoral fieldwork in the Gambia, Stella’s ethnographic research as a medical anthropologist had brought her in close contact with members of the LGBTQIA+ community, which is why she clearly states that: “my political activism has been related to my academic journey as a scholar of sexuality.”¹¹ 2014 marked a key year in that journey as:

The [Anti-Homosexuality] law was passed in 2014 for the first time and I was actively involved as an ally working with a research community, my research subjects, my interviewees, people who I ate with and who I was writing about who were facing the possibility of death and I couldn’t do research as other academics who sit in the ivory tower and are removed from the communal lives of the people they work with. And so, I became an activist.¹²

The Anti-Homosexuality Act—based on a 2009 Bill known as the Bahati Bill—was passed by the Parliament of Uganda on December 20, 2013, and signed into law by the President of Uganda Yoweri Kaguta Museveni on February 24, 2014. It criminalized same sex relations as well as the ‘aiding and abetting of homosexuality.’ In a Facebook post from the time, Stella describes the grim and fearful mood enveloping the country at the time:

Life continues. We are still eating, drinking and sleeping. We are still breathing, laughing and crying. We are still residing in our country. We may have shifted from one area to another, changed houses for safety or gone visiting for a while, but we are still here. Our hearts are heavy with anxiety, our palpitations pump harder because of fear, but life continues. We fear the arbitrary arrests, homophobic insults, hateful intimidation, beatings and evictions, but our hearts continue to pump blood no redder than yours. We hate the public exposure, and worry about what names are inside the tabloids—is it mine or hers or his or theirs. And yet when you disclose in the public media, we remain alive—hearts pumping faster-faster, but life remains within us. Life continues. We sleep and rise, breathing, breathing, breathing all the time ... The bill became an act among the laws of Uganda, but what did it stop? You go to church and praise the Lord the bill became an act.

¹¹ Film interview with Stella Nyanzi, November 30, 2023.

¹² Film interview with Stella Nyanzi, November 30, 2023.

We come to church and praise the same Lord for keeping us alive. What has changed in Uganda today? What did your energies get you? Life continues. Is this what you hoped for? Life continues ...¹³

The law was challenged by ten petitioners, which included academics, journalists, both ruling party and opposition MPs, human rights activists and rights groups. They claimed that it violated the constitutional right to privacy and dignity, as well as the right to be free from discrimination and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Stella Nyanzi was actively involved in organizing for the petition against that law and was in court on August 1, 2014, the day that the constitutional court of Uganda invalidated the law declaring it null and void on procedural grounds.¹⁴

While it was Stella's LGBTQIA+ activism that sparked off her online presence and community, the real growth and expansion started with the death of her father on August 9, 2014, just a few days after the victory in court. The injustice of her father's death, who was unable to access necessary medication upon suffering a heart attack, led her to seek a grieving community.¹⁵ Her preferred platform at the time was Facebook, where she started posting her grief poetry.

My beloved father died mercilessly like a dog.
A medical doctor of four decades,
Heaving and groaning in the backseat of his car.
Driven that dark night by his youngest brother,
Searching in vain from one health unit to another
For a single vial of absent medicine.
His death is on the hands of the dictatorship
Which prized bullets and guns over medicines.
"Give us bullets and guns, not medicine!" (Nyanzi 2020: 49)

In our interview Stella referred to her period of mourning as one of 'the political grieving,' where her personal loss and pain were infused with a growing awareness of deep social injustices in her country:

Part of my crisis is around medicine and pharmacies and yes it was very personal I was grieving and I was out of it but part of what makes it public is that for the first time I realize what poor people that rely on public health services need...all our lives until that time we had been able to get medicine through my father's prescriptions or he'd send us to a specialist, friends of his, and he'd

¹³ Facebook post, March 3, 2014.

¹⁴ The law was reintroduced ten years later and this time it was upheld by the Constitutional Court in April 2024. Homosexuality is now a crime punishable by death in Uganda.

¹⁵ Interview with Stella Nyanzi, October 1, 2022, Ferrara (Italy).

pay the bill...as long as he was alive we were protected in very real ways from the everyday grief and sadness and frustration of people who need public health facilities that have medicines provided by government... So I began writing about public funding, public health, pharmacology... so many of the messages at the time were against the government spending on security, tear gas, instead of hospital facilities.¹⁶

The following year, Nyanzi's mother died in very similar circumstances, waiting for an ambulance that never came and reaching the hospital too late to receive any medical assistance.

My sweet mother died senselessly like a frog.
A social worker and patriotic NRM cadre,
Lying under the tree where she collapsed.
Conscious, but unable to lift her elderly body,
Waiting in vain from one hour to another hour,
For an absent ambulance with neither driver nor fuel.
Her death is on the hands of the dictatorship.
Which prefers huge armored vehicles over ambulances.
"Give us Black Mambas and 'Kabangalis' not ambulances!" (Nyanzi 2020, 49)

In mourning her mother, Stella experienced once again the close connection between the personal and the political, and her political awareness and anger grew.

Her growing anger against the NRM government eventually led her to the opposition party, the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) headed by Kizza Besigye. In a 2016 Facebook post from the time, she describes her change in political affiliation in the terms of an ending marriage with an abusive and sexually disappointing spouse:

'Ssenga' [auntie], my marriage to the NRM disgusts me these days. I am returning the butiiti waistbeads you gave me on the night of our marriage. Even these soft nkumbi cloth [shoulder cloth] no longer have any value in my life. This husband no longer knows what his responsibilities are to me his wife. I am so fed up of this gu-man that whenever he comes to bed with his drum-stick, the drum beat from my skin can only be the hollow mourning of a new widow. Ssenga my first love for my husband the NRM died a long time ago such that whenever he touches me with holy adult lust, I feel ugly, used and abused. Ah-ah, there is nothing for me in this marriage, Ssenga. Making love with the NRM is so painful that we always first fight for my panties before he tears them off my thinning thighs. Over the years, I have been variously hurt so badly by my husband - the NRM that even the 'akachabali' no longer brings the rivers of life to our marriage. I am so fed up with my husband, the NRM that even the doggy-style you taught us no longer brings any electric charges

¹⁶ Interview with Stella Nyanzi, October 1, 2022, Ferrara (Italy).

running between my belly-button and thighs. Ssenga, this month I am divorcing the NRM and voting for a new young lover. Kizza Besigye oyeeeeee!¹⁷

The first rainy season of 2016 marked another period of great upheavals in Stella's life. The first was work related, as disagreements with her boss over her contractual conditions led to her staging of a nude protest at the office premises, where she first chained herself to the office gates, smeared red paint on the walls and then undressed. The staging of this protest required Stella to further attune her digital activism skills in order to reach as wide an audience as possible. It was this protest in fact that got her on Twitter, as she explained in our interview:

I wasn't a tweep for a long time, I was on Twitter only to read mainly, I hated Twitter...when I was at MISR I went to a talk by a South African woman who said to us that you have to be consistent—your professional profile on Twitter and on Facebook have to be consistent because people read the two together and I didn't have a very big presence on Twitter but a friend of mine, a feminist lawyer says: "Stella the elite are on Twitter they are not on Facebook"—so what she helped me do was get in the hashtag mode of battle.¹⁸

The incident was investigated by a committee headed by Hajjati Sharifah Buzeki from the public service commission, which largely found Nyanzi culpable of insubordination and failure to honour her employment contract.¹⁹ Still, the incident had opened a new terrain of political activism which Stella was learning to master through increased digital skills, which were proving revelatory in that "the ease of social media—to do something so simple, so affordable, so in my hands and online—you can't fight that."²⁰ These new digital skills increased her online visibility importantly, taking her activism to wider and wider audiences across the country, in defiance of the huge waves of criticism she had already been receiving for her online writings, as elucidated in these two 2014 posts:

¹⁷ Facebook post, February 2, 2016. *Akachabali* is a sexual technique used to enhance female pleasure during sexual relations practiced in Burundi, Rwanda, the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Western Uganda and Western Tanzania. The reference to *Ssenga*, the auntie, is also connected to female sexual practices, as explained by Tamale: "*ensonga za Ssenga* (Ssenga matters) among the Baganda people of Uganda signifies an institution that has endured through centuries as a tradition of sexual initiation. At the helm is the paternal (or surrogate) aunt whose role is to tutor young women in a range of sexual matters, including pre-menarche practices, pre-marriage preparation, erotics and reproduction" (Tamale 2006).

¹⁸ Interview with Stella Nyanzi, October 1, 2022, Ferrara (Italy).

¹⁹ The University Appointments Board eventually agreed on the termination of Stella's contract at its meeting held on December 11, 2018.

²⁰ Interview with Stella Nyanzi, October 1, 2022, Ferrara (Italy).

I am a loud-mouthed woman, with strong opinions that I have no problem articulating. I do not agree with everything out there because I have a brain that I use to think for myself. My mother-dearie has received phone-calls on end from relatives who think she should restrain, control, repress and limit me. What is the logic of intimidation and threats given by distant family members who do not agree with me? If they are so concerned about me, why do they call my sweet ageing mother and breathe their complexes through her phone's ear-piece?

"Your Auntie Bee just got off the phone and this time she really got me worried about the things you write on that facebook of yours. She told me to ask you to stop shaming the family-name," my mum implored me.

"Eh-eh, Auntie Bee is running over her fat self," I shot back.

"Stella Nyanzi, daughter of a bullet! This is your auntie, my cousin that you are disrespecting," my mum feigned shock at my irreverence.

"Tell Auntie Bee that my teachers, right from P1, had their hands full trying to get me to keep quiet. I was always punished for talking as a child when everyone else was obediently putting two little fingers on their mouths. Auntie Bee should keep quiet if she so desires, but I say whatever I want to say," I responded to my mother.

"Don't you see that Auntie Bee is acting out of love when she calls and instructs me to ask you to keep quiet?" my mum asked.

"What love is this? Where has she been all these last few years? Why show up now, and only show up to silence me? Atwale eri!" I responded.

Back and forth we went, my mum restating her point, and me not budging. These phone-calls from my parents telling me about relatives who want me silent have become an annoying feature of my everyday life. The concerned relatives read my postings on facebook and then they call my parents. I am not six years old anymore! But even when I was six, my parents always allowed me to speak. ALSO, since these busybodies are probably reading this message too, here goes: I request that you stop bothering my parents' retirement. Call me directly and talk with me. I dare you. If you really know me, claim to love me, and still want me silent, call me and ask me to keep quiet. AS IF!!!²¹

Some academics are very stuffy, boring and take themselves too seriously! I have just been rebuked for being an academic who is active on facebook. The senior scholar who was rebuking me also assured me that I will not make a successful scholar if colleagues learn that I write a daily facebook status. He warned me that I was wasting a lot of precious time on social media; time that would otherwise be spent on academic knowledge production.

"Nobody will take you seriously as a university-based academic, if you continue wasting your time posting things on facebook and commenting on other people's wall," he warned me.

I smiled and let him have his moment quacking. Then I wrote this facebook post.²²

At the very start of 2017, Stella's identity as a digipolitical rebel was further consolidated when on January 27 she published a Facebook poem in which she called the president of Uganda a pair of buttocks. Soon after she published another post in which she criticised the Minister of Education—First

²¹ Facebook post, March 27, 2014.

²² Facebook post, May 6, 2014.

Lady, Janet Museveni—for failing to realize an election promise to provide free sanitary pads for schoolgirls.

Stella was arrested on April 7, 2017 and released after thirty-three days on a non-cash bail. These events, however, mark the beginning of the second biographical period I have organized Stella Nyanzi's biography in, that of trials and arrests (2017-2019), which I do not have the time to go into in the space of this chapter, where I also want to leave some space to present Stella Nyanzi's digital writings not only in their biographical dimension, but also in their adequate literary and political dimension.

4. Radical rudeness—but feminist!

Stella Nyanzi's writing style has often been associated to the Uganda tradition of radical rudeness, especially by journalists writing about her.²³ Radical rudeness is a term coined by historian Carol Summers to refer to a Ganda genre of anti-colonial resistance dating back to the late 1940s and early 1950s when Buganda anti-colonial officials employed it as an act of civil disobedience intended to disrupt the polite social etiquette that was maintained between British colonial authorities and Ganda ruling elite (Summers 2006).

Key examples of the radical rudeness disruption strategy are evidenced by Summers as the 1944 protest pamphlet *Buganda Nyaffe* (Buganda our mother), which openly criticized British-Ganda relations for the hypocrisy of British colonial hospitality and the co-option of Ganda political elites, and a 1948 "scathing letter of eighteen single-spaced typed pages" (Summers 2006: 741) published in the newspaper by radical Ganda activist Semakula Mulumba, in which he publicly declined the Bishop of Uganda's dinner invitation.

Radical rudeness thus has an important intellectual history as a powerful Ganda political genre, used as a tool of provocation, revelation and unsettlement of oppressive political forces. When asked about how she sees herself fitting into this genre, Stella responded the following:

So at the time I first engage with this concept I'm in prison I've been writing and a lawyer says to me a number of thinkers in Uganda associate your work to the radical rudeness tradition and I thought "wow! I even belong to a tradition!" people have said to me: "your work belongs to this genealogy" and many journalists since then have said "oh! You follow in the radical rudeness tradition". I say yes ... to a degree ... but I am not fighting against colonialism, I am fighting against a dictatorship in Uganda...I am not a man, I am all woman! The language that I use has been given

²³ See for example Nothias, Toussaint and Rosebell Kagumire, 'Digital Radical Rudeness: The Story of Stella Nyanzi,' Center on Digital Culture and Society, January 29, 2020.

license to be used by men of a particular political class to which I am not a member of. So, if radical rudeness is allowed to be used by men I don't fall under that tradition. However, what I think that people mean is that components of the poems I have written can be characterised in terms of the content as rude and as radical. I think that also for me radical is important as an invitation that the work that I do has a purpose to change the politics to change ad set agendas that may not be part of the agendas of the public discourse in Uganda. Is all my work under this? I don't think so. My most popular work and social poems that have travelled farthest are the ones that contain elements of rudeness.²⁴

Stella thus sees her gender as a key feature differentiating her from the Ganda radical rudeness tradition, which gives the genre a new and different twist. Her use of sexual metaphors and obscene language, for example, is one such aspect of her feminist infusion of radical rudeness:

When I use sexual metaphors to communicate about the politics in Uganda, I find it a very tantalizing, sort of titillating method of engaging otherwise very dull, disillusioned, passive Ugandan members of society. But infusing the political discussion with sex and sexuality for me is a very feminist method. As a Ugandan woman, as an African woman, part of the strategies that have been used by grandmothers, great grandmothers and all our ancestors as African women have always had an element of rudeness because once a woman in a patriarchal society steps out of line and speaks up to men that is already rude, because in a patriarchal society like the one I come from in Buganda, women have their place. And so for a woman such as myself to speak up! To speak to power! Not with gratitude and thankfulness but criticize and challenge and call out and even insult that to me is very feminist I think its breaking patriarchal hierarchies of respectability and it's stepping out of my place as a woman... I don't think its new...I am not the first African woman to do this.²⁵

While she herself did not make the link with radical rudeness as an established tradition until she was in prison, as described above, Stella was already very clear about her radical feminism and about how this informed her personal and political positioning in the world. In a 2015 Facebook post she writes how she got this from her mother, and describes what for her was her mother's greatest act of defiance to the patriarchy, which was to refuse to be buried in her matrimonial graveyard:

I suckled the origins of my radical feminism from my mother's breasts. Yes. In her death last week, I finally understood the genesis of my passionate desire to know, protect and defend my rights and those of others. At one point in my teenage life, my mother started expressly stating that she was never to be buried in her matrimonial graveyard. Instead, she preferred to be returned to her own family's graveyard. As I grew up, I often heard her telling different people diverse versions of this very same statement." When I die, take me back to my father's land. Don't bury me in Nyanzi's

²⁴ Film interview with Stella Nyanzi, Munich, November 30, 2023.

²⁵ Film interview with Stella Nyanzi, Munich, November 30, 2023.

family graveyard,” Mummy would say. And then she died. I was astonished by the numbers of people who came to attend the late night funeral-meeting where the elders made decisions about her final farewell procedures. Mummy had repeatedly told over twenty close friends and significant relatives about her firm decision to be buried among her own patriline. Although her introduction ceremony (*kwanjula*), hen-party (*kasiki*), matrimonial church service and reception bound her through marriage to my father, she wanted to finally sever this connection in her death and last resting place on earth. For many Christians, Ugandans and Baganda specifically, this act of a married woman refusing to be buried in her husband’s family graveyard amounts to taboo. For my mother, this decision was about knowing her desires, rights and entitlements. And indeed, my father’s clansmen and clanswomen graciously agreed to my mother’s expressed wishes. We buried her besides her oldest sister’s grave; in a spot Mummy booked and showed us many times when she was still living. I celebrate my mother's radical defiance! I love my mother’s passionate feminist genes that she passed on to me. Viva Mummy!!²⁶

5. Nude protesting—but online!

Another important genre of political protest that Stella has importantly adopted, as well as digitized and popularised, is that of female nude protesting. This is an established genre of political protest used all over the world, but that has a particularly important heritage in the African continent, as exposed by Professor Sylvia Tamale in her October 28, 2016 inaugural lecture at the Makerere School of Law: ‘Nudity, Protest and the Law in Uganda,’ which was inspired by Stella’s nude protest at Makerere University on April 18, 2016.

Stella’s own take to her nude protesting has been that of a feminist mode of challenging power, one that has proven very effective in the face of what she felt where constant obstacles to obtaining what she believed to be her rights, whether in terms of her rights as an employee or in term of her rights as a Ugandan citizen.

So protesting by undressing for me was really one of the cheapest modes of countering institutional power in court, at Makerere University and in my clan—I had nobody for legal representation but the costs and the time it takes to challenge people in court were too heavy for a lone woman...on my own I had been engaging with the public media, the social media, also communities in the institutions I belonged to but nobody was giving me audience—the only way I was able to create a spectacle large enough to get an audience and set the agenda of the injustices I was meeting was when I undressed.²⁷

²⁶ Facebook post, August 18, 2015.

²⁷ Film interview with Stella Nyanzi, Munich, November 30, 2023.

In her inaugural lecture, Tamale refers to the pre-colonial West African Oyo Empire, where women of the Oyo-Ile protested naked to show their rejection of Bashorun Gaa's harsh rule in the 17th and 18th centuries. She refers to Igbo women using their traditional practice of *ogu umunwanye* or 'sitting on a man' in the tens of thousands to challenge British colonial policies in 1929, in what became known as the women's war—resulting in the halting of offensive colonial policies and the securing of a few seats in the native courts. She discusses Cameroonian women who in 1958 unleashed the age-old tradition of the *anlu* (a female network from the areas of Kom and Kedjom traditionally used to punish those who transgressed social norms), in a three-year campaign against colonial threats to their farmlands—resulting in the establishment of a women's court and a shadow government that remained in place for one year. Tamale discusses the angry homeless women stripping in the South African Soweto township against police brutality in the 1990s and Kenyan mothers of political prisoners staging a hunger strike and stripping naked in Nairobi's Uhuru Park in 1992; Nigerian women in the Niger Delta against pollution by oil companies in 2001 and Liberian women stripping naked when talks between Charles Taylor and the rebel groups stalled in Accra in 2003 and others still (Tamale 2016).

Like with the radical rudeness genres, also for the case of nude protesting Stella is clearly not the first and is well placed in a proud tradition of African women protestors who have wielded their nudity in defiance of corrupt authorities. Still, she is probably one of the first—if not *the* first—to transfer this genre of protest to the online sphere. Nyanzi staged two major nude protests, the one at Makerere University in 2016 discussed above and one at the courthouse in 2019, both of which are innovative for their digital aspect. Talking about her Makerere nude protesting she describes how:

It was eight, it was raining it was cold there was nobody I was alone... so I undress – I take a picture and I post it ...so when I do the clothes for the first time in my life I record a video – a very short video on my Samsung phone- and I post this – so that is the video that brought [the crowds...] – the phone calls began ... then I saw camera people positioned and I thought I have occupied his office but I need some colour...so I began shoutingso I never put anything on youtube – I don't like youtube, I don't like video, I prefer photos and texts...²⁸

Talking about her other nude protest, she recounts how after she had been convicted under the Computer Misuse Act, she was supposed to be taken back to court for sentencing but instead:

Instead of sentencing me in court ... instead of going down the hill to court I went up to the all-male security prisons and into where capital offenders are kept...I remember my sense of fear and shame

²⁸ Interview with Stella Nyanzi, October 1, 2022, Ferrara (Italy).

as I walked through these corridors with men on each side...men who hadn't seen a woman for many years of imprisonment and they were making all these lewd remarks...nobody explained to me that my right to have a fair sentencing in court had been taken away from me...I was taken into a small room with computers and a camera and I felt totally beaten but being the sort of radical woman that I am, thought the court cannot get away with infringing my rights! I am a prisoner surrounded by all these male wardens in a male prison and I thought: what does one do? What does one do to challenge the system? And I very quickly looked at the cameras ahead of me, there was a big screen here I could see the court room, and in that moment of suffering injustice at the hands of the court, I spoke back by undressing. There was a camera provided by the government of Uganda, by the prison system, going into the magistrate as she was sentencing me... I threw off my clothes! And I threw off my bra! And I jiggled my big breasts at her! And I raised my middle finger many times.²⁹

Stella describes the power of nude protesting as helping her shed off shame and providing her with a shamelessness that has been very effective for her activism:

After I undressed at MISR I didn't care—whether I lost a lot, I had won—how do you fight with a naked woman? Men don't know how to fight that because men have domesticated and weaponized the systems and structures—but these other weapons...³⁰

6. Conclusion

There is no real conclusion to this biographical sketch, which is only a small showcase of a much larger biographical project on Stella Nyanzi meant to feature in an even larger publication project on digital politics in contemporary Uganda. The aim of this chapter is to offer readers a glimpse into the original and inexhaustible wellspring that is Stella Nyanzi by piecing together digital texts mainly from her Facebook profile, her published poetry and two extended interviews carried out with her, one of which in the form of a documentary film interview. As mentioned in the Introduction, the biographical sketch presented here relates to the first biographical period I have identified in my ten-year biographical project on Stella, which is the 2014-2016 period in which she consolidated herself as both an offline and online activist. There is much still to be written about her journey after 2016, and it is my honour and my privilege to continue writing her story. For the moment, I will conclude here with a wonderful poem of hers in which she describes her own take on her writing:

²⁹ Film interview with Stella Nyanzi, Munich, November 30, 2023.

³⁰ Interview with Stella Nyanzi, October 1, 2022, Ferrara (Italy).

My writing may be cheap
But it is rather effective.
My poetry may be tasteless
But it is shaking the nation.
My Facebook posts may be tacky
But they grab the balls of the tyranny.
My paragraphs may be repulsive
But they stung the Queen Bee.
My stanzas may be irreverent
But they poked the leopards anus.
My language may be dirty
But it exposed the dictatorship.
My pen never stops writing;
I will write myself to freedom! (Nyanzi 2020; 14)

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