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## The erasure of Vanessa Nakate portrays an idealised climate activism

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Cropping out Vanessa Nakate from a photo with fellow young climate activists at the World Economic Forum has prompted allegations of racism. Despite forecasts that the African continent will be most affected by climate change, the erasure has been seen as part of a broader pattern of silencing African voices on climate debates.

Five young climate activists met at the World Economic Forum in Davos on 24 January 2020, gathered to raise the alarm at global inaction on climate change. The news agency Associated Press (AP) photographed the group, later **cropping out the Ugandan climate activist Vanessa**

**Nakate** for publication, leaving the four young European climate activists including the famed Greta Thunberg. That the four remaining activists were white prompted allegations of racism, which led to AP arguing the edit was made on 'purely composition grounds'. But does this fit into a broader pattern of silencing African voices on climate debates? Four graduates from LSE's **Programme for African Leadership** give their view.

## A presence misconstrued as aesthetically unappealing and unwelcome

### **Victoria Malowa**

To understand the erasure of Vanessa Nakate, we must first consider how mainstream media platforms are choreographed stages, designed to produce or cement ideas or fantasies. In most cases, not everyone gets to participate. We observe this stage production through the experience of Vanessa.

The original photo was choreographed to produce an ideal photo. The Associated Press removed the building structure and skyline in the background, clustering the faces of the white activists and finally chopping off Vanessa from the frame. The resulting photo clearly made Greta stand out. The effect was to set a stage portraying two versions of climate change activism: one represented by Greta Thunberg and her fellow white activists, and the other represented by Vanessa Nakate.

At first, when Nakate confronted the AP about the cropped photo, the media house explained its actions by claiming that it had no ill intentions but did so to enhance the photo's aesthetic value. But one wonders why this was done at the expense of Vanessa alone and not the other three white activists who were also standing close to Greta.

These aesthetic considerations may appear innocuous to the less discerning, but they hide a much more sinister problem – the idealised version of climate change activism and environmentalism. There may be a growing fascination with the new breed of young activists, but certain powerful institutions like the mainstream media are actively designing the cognitive path through which such activism should be perceived. Vanessa was caught up in an act purposefully intended to bequeath Greta the limelight. When these artistic decisions were being made, Vanessa failed to make the cut. Her presence was not only misconstrued as aesthetically unappealing but also unwelcome.

Even though the effects of climate change on communities of colour are well documented, racial prejudice means such effects are often viewed as inconsequential. Issues of climate change are hence not considered worthy of those communities or of their protection.

## Black or white: unity for climate justice

### Arthur Owor

The decision to edit out Nakate should be seen against the backdrop of a long history of undercoverage of African voices by Western media in climate justice debates. While the #rhodesmustfall and #feesmustfall movements have reawakened discussions on decolonisation, to bring in voices from the periphery, African collaborators often only appear in the footnotes of published studies in academic journals, and even less often in mainstream coverage on these issues.

I recently attended a workshop on the practice of **transnational collaboration in academic research** where the dissemination of knowledge through media and academia was still viewed as taking on extractive forms. There remains a sharp divide between the global North and global South in the knowledge production and dissemination process.

Vanessa Nakate's exclusion from the photo with her fellow activists depicts how deeply the notion of colonialism still permeates the social, economic, political and, more recently, ecological dimensions of society. Writing in 2019, researcher **David Mwambari noted** that undoing the effects of colonialism has never been easy and cautions that the journey towards decolonisation remains long and treacherous in the age of information and knowledge. Indeed, the move by Associated Press demonstrates that colonialism continues to be a lived reality and is far from over.

The incident epitomises the context in which global climate justice is itself colonised. Africa is often under/misrepresented even though it has lower emissions than other continents – and will be the most affected by climate change. For this reason major campaigns against these injustices are being undertaken by activists and advocacy groups on the continent.

The exclusion of Nakate is an extension of colonialism in international media. But just as Michael Jackson sang twenty-nine years ago, 'It don't matter if you're black or white ... it's a turf war on a global scale, I'd rather hear both sides of the tale...' Black lives matter. Black faces and voices do too.

## Vanessa Nakate is the missing link between climate activism and 'crops'

### **Emmanuel Merissa and Susan Lado**

While we are used to hearing much about the nexus between climate change and produce, the past week has been abuzz with climate activism and a different kind of 'crop'.

Africa, despite its low carbon emissions, bears the brunt of climate change-induced catastrophes. The industrialised economies in the

global North are culprits unwilling to pull their weight to preserve our planet. Vanessa Nakate's presence at the World Economic Forum therefore represented not just African people but all those whose perspectives are different from cosseted people's comfortable realities in cities like Toronto, Stockholm or Rome. Removing her from the photo taken with white counterparts does not only seek to reduce her efforts to naught, but it fundamentally attempts to deny people of colour any say in the debate pitting climate-change sceptics against science-believing folks – highly reflective of the White Saviour Industrial Complex.

There is no doubt that the picture of these anti-climate change campaigners was seen through a racial lens by the AP. After having her presence effaced, Nakate said that she understood what racism meant. Whether in the corporate world, academia, international organisations or non-governmental organisations, worth is still often attributed not to performance but skin colour. In addition to emotional hurt, racism has a negative impact **on its victims' life chances**.

Those whose epidermis contains little melanin may be unable to comprehend the way in which whiteness has been historically portrayed as the passport to success, the metric of sophistication or the standard of beauty. The Vanessa Nakate saga is further evidence that there will always be atrabilious minds seeking to remind people of colour that their success does not really count because they simply do not have the 'right' appearance.

Unfortunately, racism is not something that will be inevitably cured with better education or exposure. At its root, arrogance and entitlement are responsible for the lack of sympathy between different societies. Although brave individuals like Nakate strive to raise awareness about the alarming level of abnormal weather patterns, certain morally bankrupt entities will prefer to dwell on their skin complexions rather than help them get their message across.

# Divisiveness when we should be working together?

## Helen Fortunate Mayelle

In the fight against climate change, the issue of bias in reportage of Africa did not begin with the young African climate activist Vanessa Nakate being cropped out of a photo with her fellow activists. As Nakate pins to her twitter page, massive fires in the Congo forest and elsewhere on the African continent have gone unreported by international media, as they raised our attention to fires in the Amazon, Australia and California.

That said, our collective efforts are required to combat climate change. If there is a time in human history when we must all work together, then that time is now. Due to our old tendencies of divisiveness, it is the young generation of the Greta's and the Nakate's who are teaching us how to be better humans for people and for planet.

Even if Nakate is cropped out of all her international advocacy event photos, her work will forever be imprinted in the hearts of those who matter; her name will be written in our global history books, albeit in invisible ink. Mother Earth is proud of Nakate and her colleagues, and while these children are not committing to their cause for publicity itself, at the very least we can allow them to participate without erasure or corruption. Together We Can. As an old wise African saying goes, 'If you want to go quickly go alone, if you want to go far go together.'

## About the author



Victoria Malowa

Victoria Malowa holds an MSc in International Development from LSE and Humanitarian Emergencies and a BA in International Relations. She nurtures a keen interest in studying policies that explore the interdisciplinary issues of global governance, sovereignty, social architecture and technology and the impact of such issues on humanitarian assistance.



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Arthur Owor is the Coordinator of the Our Trees We Need Answers environmental activist group and Director of the Centre for African Research, Uganda.



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Emmanuel Merissa is an Ethiopian researcher working at the Midrand-based African Peer Review Mechanism, the sole African-grown and owned governance instrument. He is a PfAL 5 alumni from LSE where he also attained an MSc in International.



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Susan Lado is a South Sudanese LSE PfAL 5 alumna with an MSc

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Helen Fortunate Mayelle is a PfAL alumna of the third cohort. She graduated from LSE with a MSc International Development in 2014 and immediately joined the international community in the fight against the deadly Ebola Virus emergency in West Africa.

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