

Vanessa Nakate and Perceptions of Black Student Activists

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Abstract: This editorial discusses the intersection of environmental and racial justice and how the movement has failed to center voices most affected by climate change.

Keywords: environmental justice; intersectionality; racial justice; climate change activists; youth activists; Associated Press; media practices

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Student climate activists have become increasingly vocal about the realities of global warming. However, a telling incident occurred in which a Ugandan activist, a Black person of color named Vanessa Nakate, was completely cropped out of a photo published by the Associated Press (Woodyatt, 2020). Black student activists are forced into boxes of what society views as appropriate to fit a narrative of who they are and what they can do. This stereotyping has its roots in the white savior complex and its legacy of erasure. By calling out harmful media practices, we can fight against this pattern of Black erasure and controlled, inaccurate narratives.

Climate change directly affects us all, but “women, LGBTIQ and other marginalized communities are the first to suffer and die in increasingly common climate-related catastrophe” (Malik, 2019). Thus, activists like Vanessa Nakate and many other people of color are involved firsthand in Fridays for Future and other social movements surrounding climate change. However, the Associated Press incident “reflects the constant silencing of diverse voices in climate action groups” (Evelyn, 2020, para. 10). This is just once instance of a pattern of exclusion: “Jamie Margolin, founder of the climate action group Zero Hero, said this exclusion of activists of color was part of a culture of silencing marginalized communities disproportionately affected by the climate crisis” (para. 12).

In eco-activism, it is impossible to ignore the notion of the white savior: “Originally coined by Nigerian-American novelist Teju Cole in response to the Kony 2012 media frenzy, this phrase refers to the confluence of practices, processes, and institutions that reify historical inequities to ultimately validate white privilege” (Anderson, 2013, p. 39). The idea of the white savior is that there are people suffering in the world, which is codified as third world and racialized in the context of climate change, and that the only ones who can fix it are white people. This background explains the rise in popularity of white climate change activists at the expense of activists like Nakate, who are ignored or even actively pushed out of the conversation.

When talking about the media, we must remember that

Even when the political and economic conditions that originally generated controlling images disappear, such images prove remarkably tenacious because they not only keep Black women oppressed but are key in maintaining interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression. The status of [Black] women as outsiders or strangers becomes the point from which other groups define their normality. (Collins, 1991, p. 68)

This means that the images of Black women are highly controlled, and anything that does not fit the suggested narrative is deleted, cropped out, or ignored. If Nakate had not taken to Twitter to advocate for herself, the Associated Press (AP) would not have felt the pressure to apologize (Woodyatt, 2020). Her background as a climate activist is public and well-known: “Nakate is the founder of the climate action groups Youth for Future Africa and the Rise Up Movement” (Evelyn, 2020, para. 21). If organizations such as the AP can act with impunity against popular climate activists, imagine the situation in which lesser-known activists find themselves.

Part of the complexity in this situation arrives in the form of fitting climate activists and people affected by climate change into two opposing sides. It is easier for our brains to process diametrically opposed things, like savior and saved. This is because

The foundations of a complex social hierarchy become grounded in the interwoven concepts of either/or dichotomous thinking, oppositional difference, and objectification. With domination based on difference forming an essential underpinning for this entire system of thought, these concepts invariably imply relationships of superiority and inferiority, hierarchical bonds that mesh with political economies of race, gender, and class oppression. (Collins, 1991, p. 70)

This explains the narrative of the saved and the savior. To examine the reality, we must take a step back from the current narrative and seek out stories of Black and Indigenous people of color who have been advocating against industrial colonization and destruction of the global South: “anti-colonial resistance has long been interwoven with environmental protection. Indigenous, Black, global South and racialized communities have continuously fought for land rights against large-scale deforestation and resource overexploitation with ancestral and innovative knowledge and practice” (Malik, 2019, para. 5). Here, the term “global South” refers to the southern hemisphere.

By recognizing the past of climate change activists, we can work to disrupt the narrative that the only students working against industrialization are white saviors. Instead, we can incorporate the historical activism seen in the global South (southern hemisphere) and reinforce their position as the leaders of their own revolution.

Educators and youth activists seeking further resources should consult the Climate Justice Alliance, the Indigenous Environmental Network, and the Intersectional Environmentalist.

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