



By Rasna Warah



When an insensitive photo editor at the Associated Press (AP) erased the image of a Ugandan climate activist from a photo that included the Swedish climate star Greta Thunberg, it created a stir and led to accusations of racism against the news organisation.

It all started when Vanessa Nakate posted a tearful video of herself where she lamented the fact that she, unlike the white activists attending the World Economic Forum in Davos, had not been recognised for her efforts on account of her skin colour. By removing her from the photo (the cropped version of which showed Thunberg with three other young white activists), [she said](#) on Twitter, AP had not only erased a person, but the entire African continent.

AP responded by explaining that Nakate was cropped from the photo because the building behind her was a distraction. As an amateur photographer myself, I can see why a photo editor would want to use a perfect background of the Swiss Alps and not an unsightly building in an image. Maybe racism had nothing to do with the decision to remove her; it was merely an aesthetic choice. However, even the AP's editors had to finally concede that they had made a journalistic error.

Nakate is still young, so probably she doesn't know yet that being a woman of colour means being constantly erased, ignored, ridiculed, humiliated, harassed or ghosted by those in power - usually white men. She should have known that black people, and especially black women, rarely get the credit for the work they do, even when it has global impact. She might want to recall that the #MeToo movement was started by Tarana Burke, an African-American woman, but only gained momentum when white Hollywood actresses started using the hashtag and started talking about

their own experiences of sexual harassment and abuse. White people not only steal non-white people's ideas, they appropriate them, make them their own, and then take the credit.

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Nakate may have heard that the civil rights movement in the United States only gained credence when white presidents like John F. Kennedy embraced it, and that Nelson Mandela gained "saintly" status only after he forgave his white tormentors.

Nakate made the mistake of naively believing that she is an equal partner in the fight for the climate; she thought that she would not only be recognised for her efforts, but would be rewarded as well. I applaud her for her optimism and faith, but as she gets older (and more cynical) she will realise that black and brown women - or what we now call women of colour - rarely get to sit at the high table unless they are "anointed" by the white Western world.

Often black people don't get recognised even in their own countries until a white person or institution endorses them. The Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathai, for instance, was considered an irritating busybody by the Kenyan government and its leaders until she won the Nobel Peace Prize, after which she was accorded star status.

You see, this is the problem with us black and coloured folk. We are so desperate for white people's approval and attention that when they reject or erase us, we are crushed. For many people in Asia, Africa and Latin America, recognition from one white person means more than a million accolades from our own people. It is the kind of self-hatred that makes us use skin bleaching creams and adopt foreign (usually British or American) accents. Nobody criticises French people for speaking with a French accent (which many consider "sexy") or speaking English badly. But if as an African you appear at a public forum with a heavy Luo accent to explain your brilliant new scientific invention, you will be dismissed as an idiot not just by white people but your own people as well.

Nakate was desperate to be seen as a climate activist in the mould of Thunberg, but she failed to see that Thunberg has many advantages that she might never have.

For one, being a white European, Thunberg doesn't need a visa to enter most countries around the world, a privilege that Nakate does not have. This means that the Swedish climate activist can go to another country and hold a protest rally at the drop of a hat. This gives her enormous social capital internationally. To get a visa to a Western country, Nakate would have to jump over many, many hurdles and prove beyond doubt that she has no intention of overstaying her visa. As she is a young single African woman, most countries in the West will view Nakate as a risk - as someone who will not return home after her visit and who will become part of the growing group of illegal immigrants in the West. Her activism credentials will be doubted, and her age, gender and skin colour will be held against her.

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This is not to say that Thunberg does not endure ridicule. The world's most powerful president, Donald Trump, has dismissed her as a young woman with "an anger management problem". Climate change deniers will no doubt paint her as a pessimist out to destroy the world's economy. Because of

her age and gender, she will face a backlash from the old male establishment. However, Thunberg doesn't have to face the kind of racism that people like Nakate have to face whenever they confront the white Western world.

Nakate will have to work twice as hard as a white woman to gain a place on the international stage. But even if she does, she will probably be a side show, not the main event. And if her views are considered too radical, she might never be invited again.

Some of us (and I include myself) have come to understand how little our views or opinions matter when we attend conferences where all the leading "experts" on a panel are white or male or both. Sometimes, for the sake of "diversity" or "representation", a few African scholars or analysts may be included in a collection of essays or in panel discussions. However, in my experience, only those scholars or analysts who do not deviate too far from the traditional narrative about Africa (poverty, war, refugees, failed states, and the like) are invited to contribute; in other words, they gain visibility through conformity. Radical thinkers, or those who actively reject racist or distorted representations of Africa, are rarely invited. They are also denied jobs. I have been denied many jobs due to my gender, skin colour, nationality, ethnicity or age (yes, ageism is real). Shouting "Racism!" rarely has the desired effect. White people begin to actively shun you or describe you as over-sensitive or paranoid.

In her book *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, the black British writer Reni Eddo-Lodge explains that she stopped having conversations about race with white people because most white people don't even recognise that racism exists. "I cannot continue to emotionally exhaust myself trying to get this message across, while also toeing a very precarious line that tries not to implicate any one white person in their role in perpetuating structural racism, lest they character assassinate me", she writes.

Eddo-Lodge says that white people often silence people of colour by pretending that the problem lies with the latter, and not with the former, or by accusing the non-white person of being overly sensitive about race. "They've never had to think about what it means, in power terms, to be white, so any time they're vaguely reminded of this fact, they interpret it as an affront", she says.

"I can no longer have this conversation, because we're often coming at it from completely different places", she adds.

If they cannot silence you by ignoring you, or by claiming that you are over-reacting, they co-opt you. For instance, the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina was actively wooed by the Western literary establishment after his satirical essay [How to Write About Africa](#) went viral. He lapped up the attention - but it came at a price. Never again would he write so passionately about how Africa has been misrepresented in the Western media, though it must be said that the essay profoundly impacted how Western journalists reported on Africa. After his essay went viral, the narrative on Africa changed from "The Hopeless Continent" to "Africa Rising". Although people on the continent rejoiced, they failed to understand that neither of these narratives accurately depicts the complexities and nuances of Africa; on the contrary, they reinforce the "single story" narrative that Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie spoke so eloquently about in a [TED talk](#).

However, while Adichie can talk to the West about the danger of "a single story", she would not be a literary star today if the West had not embraced her and given her a platform to showcase her work. The white Western establishment knows that her criticisms can only go so far - they cannot topple the power relations between Africa and the West. In fact, her success reinforces the reality that in order to succeed as an African in this world, one must have the support of the West - the very West that is the subject of one's criticism.

Why are we so eager for the West to embrace and accept us? Why do we want them to like us? Why do we get so excited when Afro-pessimism is replaced with Afro-optimism? Maybe it's because, as Franz Fanon says in *Black Skin, White Masks*, black people have been made to feel inferior for so long that they "want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect". We expend much energy trying to prove our worth to white people, believing that once we have proved our worth, we will be accepted as equals. This is rarely the case because racism is so ingrained in Western culture that it may take many more centuries to eradicate it. We must remember that European powers justified slavery and colonialism by claiming that Africans were not really human beings, that they were an inferior species that needed to be subjugated for their own good.

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The late Toni Morrison said that the main function of racism is distraction - to keep black people so busy explaining themselves to white people that they would not have time for anything else:

It [racism] keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend 20 years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary.

My advice to Vanessa Nakate would be to stop seeking the approval of the white Western world and to not be too bothered if the white Western establishment doesn't give her the recognition she deserves. She must not seek fame by association with white people. She must run her campaign from the continent of Africa with fellow Africans and for the benefit of future generations of Africans. Climate change in Africa is real, and will have devastating consequences because Africa is least prepared for it. Nakate must forge relationships with like-minded African organisations to create a groundswell of African climate activists who can challenge the orthodoxy that Africans are not capable of addressing issues that affect them.

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Vanessa Nakata gains nothing by being photographed in Davos at a conference where the very people who caused the climate change crisis in the first place meet every year. Their acceptance of her means little. If she is going to bring about a climate revolution in Africa, she must look to her own culture, history, environment and people to find solutions. No one can save Africans except Africans themselves.

So Vanessa, please understand this: White people will constantly erase you. Stop asking them to put you back in the picture. You do not need their endorsement.

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