

Article

# Reimagining African Women Youth Climate Activism: The Case of Vanessa Nakate

Brendon R. Barnes

Department of Psychology, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg 2006, South Africa; bbarnes@uj.ac.za

**Abstract:** African women youth climate activists are marginalised in mainstream climate activism. There is very little scholarly work done on this group, specifically on how their agency is deployed in the context of extreme undermining. Based on a case study of the activism of Vanessa Nakate, this paper analyses online interviews, media reports and social media interactions. The text was analysed thematically. The paper identifies three social binds (location, gender, and youth) that limit her activism. Importantly, the findings show how she deploys context-dependent agency to overcome those binds. The paper offers practical and theoretical insights for the study of African women climate activism. I argue that understanding and developing personal and political agency is essential for the sustainability of African women youth climate activism.

**Keywords:** youth; climate activism; Africa; agency; sustainability



**Citation:** Barnes, B.R. Reimagining African Women Youth Climate Activism: The Case of Vanessa Nakate. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 13214. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132313214>

Academic Editors: Elvira Cicognani and Maria Fernandes-Jesus

Received: 9 September 2021

Accepted: 5 November 2021

Published: 29 November 2021

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

African women youth activists are underrepresented, undermined, and silenced in mainstream climate activism. Importantly, their agency to fight those oppressive systems has hitherto been underexplored [1,2]. This study focuses on how agency is deployed and enacted in Vanessa Nakate, an African woman climate activist. While there are other excellent African youth activists, this paper focuses on Vanessa not only because of her prominence as a leading African youth climate activist gained over a short period, but because she has been extensively undermined. Vanessa has suffered personal insults based on her appearance, racism, sexism, and infantilisation. Her persecution has come from conservative commentators in the Global North and South, including African commentators from her own country [1]. Nevertheless, Vanessa has actively sidestepped and reframed attempts to undermine her and has, in my opinion, strengthened her climate activism because of this.

The paper identifies how she evokes her in situ (present-focused) and projective agency (future-focused) agency in interactions to disrupt the binds of location, gender and youth that limit the role of African women youth activism. In so doing, she reveals new possibilities for African climate youth activism. I argue that analysing agency (in the context of being undermined) is essential to developing positive and more sustainable representations for African women climate activism beyond narrow representations of indigeneity, geopolitics, and youth. Before proceeding, however, it is important to provide some context.

Youth are increasingly engaged in climate activism through global initiatives such as Fridays for the Future, the linked School Strike for Climate, and Extinction Rebellion. The sharp increase in youth climate activism has drawn significant scholarly attention. Studies have, for example, focused on understanding the formation(s) [3] and impacts [4] of the growth in youth climate activism as a form of civic engagement. Others have focused on the multilevel structural constraints to youth climate activism and extreme personal abuse directed towards female youth activists [2].

A further body of literature focuses on identifying the more tacit but powerful assumptions of youth climate activism. For example, several studies have shown how discourses

of childhood, innocence, gender, geographical location, and ethnicity serve as binds that undermine female youth climate activism(s). For example, a study of Vanessa's Nakate's accusation of racism in the media (described in more detail below) found that journalists undermined the accusation by challenging her claims to represent Africa, by questioning whether the incident was indeed racist and that her (gendered) emotionality rendered her irrational [1]. Another study of Vanessa Nakate's interactions with journalists using conversation analysis showed how interlocutors placed the onus on her to *prove* accusations of racism [5].

Similarly, a study in Australia showed how powerful ideas of childhood are deployed to undermine youth climate activism. For example, Australian conservative commentators on climate strikes positioned youth activists as lacking knowledge, lacking civic experience, and in need of top-down help from adults, thus removing their agency to act in political ways that deviate from ideas of childhood innocence [6]. Similarly, a Canadian study analysed ideas of youth climate activism in newspaper editorials. The study found that conservative constructions of childhood innocence, children as 'becoming' the heroic individual hero, and mobilising ideas of generations all serve to depoliticise, undermine and suppress activism in the name of 'childhood' [2].

These constructions are propped up by an imaginary that seeks to suppress precocious youth who are an ever-present danger to conservative politics. Power is enacted both in structural oppression and through the ideas, narratives, and discourses that provide the limits to activism; for what better way to suppress activists than to impose societal limits to what they can say under what conditions. Therefore, any analysis of constructions of climate activism necessitates a critical interrogation of what childhood means in the first place [7] and how constructions of children move in Burman's view from 'appealing' to 'appalling' [8]. Importantly, it requires us to consider how constructions of childhood intersect with race, gender and geopolitics.

Oppressive structures ultimately serve to take away agency from youth climate activists by delegitimising and undermining them. However, it is essential to remember that activists are not passive recipients of oppressive systems. In the face of oppression, activists deploy their agency to resist, negotiate, manoeuvre, break down and reconstitute their positions. In so doing, activists attempt to create, reimagine and develop representations of their activism. There is small but growing literature on agency in youth climate activism and speaks to the question posed by Raby and Sheppard [2] when they state, "*We have also noted ways in which young climate activists themselves are pushing back against such representations. How can we think about young climate activists in different ways, outside of dominant discourses of childhood, a divisive focus on generation, and individual, privileged girl heroes?*" [p. 392].

There is a need for more scholarly work on understanding agency in youth climate activism, particularly in the global South. However, except for a few studies that have touched on agency and youth climate activism [1,2,9] or call on us to strengthen and (re) conceptualise agency, for example, in everyday activism [10,11], how African women youth climate activists mobilise and deploy agency in interactions has been chiefly neglected [1,2]. In response to this, this paper is driven by three questions: How is Vanessa Nakate undermined in online and social media interactions? How does she deploy agency to resist oppressive structures in these interactions? What does this mean for representations of African women youth activists?

### 1.1. Theoretical Framework

The starting point for this paper is that it is possible to analyse how young climate activists' oppression and agency is elicited through an analysis of interactions on social media, interviews, and online reports [2,5,12]. I draw on agency theory [13] that focuses on "human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)" (p. 963). Activists take up

and negotiate roles shaped by powerful ideas (or binds) that provide the parameters for what can be said, how it can be said and under what conditions.

I focus this analysis on a triple bind—being African, female and youth—that provide the parameters and possibilities for African women climate activists. For example, an activist may draw on youthfulness as a strength in some contexts. However, youthfulness may be a weakness if the activist is criticised for their naivety or lack of judgement. Similarly, an activist may draw on their Africanness to highlight the plight of African climate injustices to western audiences. However, their Africanness can fundamentally restrict their commentary to indigeneity, tribalism, and tradition.

Importantly, youth activists are not passive recipients of these parameters but actively mobilise their agency to negotiate alternative positions, reframes and representations [14]. For example, as we will see below, an activist accused of being emotional, irrational, and unstable could reframe their emotions as a sign of authenticity and commitment. In so doing, activists can draw on varying forms of agency to reimagine new identities and roles in climate activism.

Significantly, actors can move between the temporal dimensions of agency. For example, an actor (for example, a conservative journalist) may introduce into the interaction a historical 'iterative' position that suggests that female youth activists are emotional, irrational, with a lack of activism experience and are still in the process of 'becoming' adults. The second actor (for example, a female climate activist) can use her in-situ agency to invite and then dismantle that criticism (in the present) by making a point that authenticity, genuineness, and emotional connection with the earth are essential qualities of climate activism. In so doing, she resists and subverts the iterative (historical) position. She can then reconstitute it in a future 'projective' agentic position by pointing out the need for more authenticity into climate activism and, by implication, more female climate activists. Now, the point is not to suggest that one person's account is more valid than the other's account, but to acknowledge that actors can invoke varying temporal positions in a dynamic and dialogical manner. They reproduce but also resist, manoeuvre, restructure and create new positions in interactions. Importantly, the possibility to introduce a future agentic orientation is important for 'symbolic recomposition' [14]; that is, it offers opportunities to reimagine alternative representations. Thus, actors become agentic; they do not act alone and begin influencing others to act too [15].

Importantly, agency is not (only) a reflection of an individual's apolitical motivation and skills to navigate interactions, but is inherently linked to the political. An analysis of how actors reproduce and reframe the political is an important feature of this analysis. It also becomes an important analytical site to understand 'social action' where personal agency interjects with the political and the structural binds [15]. For example, an analysis of interaction where an actor (for example, a journalist) accuses an activist of being naïve because of her youth is not just about the individuals manoeuvring in an apolitical manner. It is fundamentally linked to the politics of what 'childhood' means in the first place in this particular context. Actors are, therefore, dialogically related to politics and structure [16].

This study is not content only with an analysis of agency in online interactions. Understanding how agency is enacted may have real-world consequences too. It also hopes to extend these findings into practical implications for solidarity and mobilisation of youth activists. Therefore, this paper hopes to develop work in critical [17] and community [18,19] psychology to understand and facilitate how communities mobilise in climate activism. In particular, the study contributes to how African youth can find a sustainable 'new' voice in global climate activism and reclaim power in a space where they have been traditionally marginalised [20,21]. Importantly, the study draws on work focusing on the influence of positive representation on transformative agency among youth climate activists [22]. It also contributes to work that disrupts mythical representations of childhood activism [23], for example, youth as innocent, apolitical, and need special guidance from adults.

Importantly, the study draws on studies that have focused on the intersection between gender, childhood, and activism, especially how virtues are constructed in climate

activism [24]. Before proceeding, it might be helpful to describe the climate activism of Vanessa Nakate.

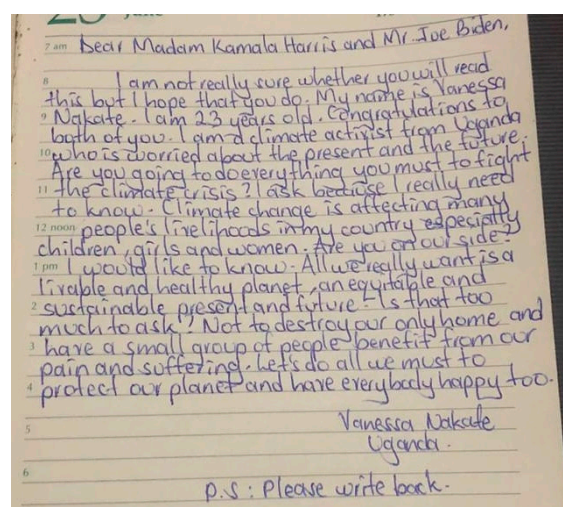
### 1.2. Vanessa Nakate

Vanessa was born in Kampala, Uganda, in 1986. After completing her university studies in 2018 and being inspired by the *Fridays for Future* movement, she started climate strikes outside the Parliament of Uganda in January 2019. Vanessa was a lone protestor for several months until other activists joined her. She initially planned to be an activist for six months but has continued. Vanessa founded the *Youth for Future Africa* movement, as well as the *Rise Up* movement more recently. She has also started the One Million Activist Voices project to collate environment and climate activists' stories. A key feature of her advocacy is the focus on intersectional justice. In other words, climate change is part of a more extensive system of injustices. Vanessa emphasises that it is essential to address other injustices such as racial injustices and gender equality to address climate injustices. Similarly, Vanessa reminds her audiences that we will never address problems such as poverty and hunger without addressing climate change.

She has participated in numerous high-level forums and received several awards over a relatively short time. While her activism is celebrated worldwide, she has also been victimised, undermined, and vilified for her views. Of course, most youth activists experience victimisation, but something is troubling about the intensity of Vanessa's undermining.

Much of the backlash happened after two much-publicised incidents. The first was when Vanessa was cropped out of a photograph published by Associated Press following a press briefing at the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos in January 2020 (hereafter referred to as the 'cropped out' incident). Vanessa was invited to participate with other youth climate activists from the Global North. However, Vanessa was cropped out of a photo by Associated Press of the activists after the meeting. Only the white activists were included in the photograph (see <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ikrd/vanessa-nakate-greta-thunberg-davos> accessed 25 October 2021). Vanessa accused the Associated Press of racism. In an emotional Twitter post afterwards, Vanessa explained why the event was so hurtful. In her own words, '*not only have you erased me, but you have erased an entire continent.*' Associated Press initially explained that Vanessa's image was removed for composition reasons. She was in front of a building, and her image was cropped out to remove the building. After much outcry, the Associated Press apologised for the incident and said they would send those involved for diversity training. Vanessa refused to accept their apology, accusing them of erasing her photo and biased reporting of climate change in Africa.

The second incident happened after Vanessa wrote a letter to the President-Elect (Joe Biden) and Vice President-Elect (Kamala Harris) of the United States of America (USA) on November 2020 (Figure 1). The letter was handwritten and uploaded to social media platforms. In the letter, she congratulates the recipients on being elected to office and asks them if they will, "*... do everything you must to fight the climate crisis?*" She explains how climate change disproportionately affects women and girls in her country and asks, "*... are you on our side?*" At the end of the letter, she states that she hopes that they will write back. Once again, Vanessa received intense backlash and trolling, explained in more detail in the Section 3.



**Figure 1.** The handwritten letter to Kamala Harris and Joe Biden. Source: [https://twitter.com/vanessa\\_vash/status/1328407339611942915](https://twitter.com/vanessa_vash/status/1328407339611942915) (accessed on 25 October 2021).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study Design

This paper is based on a qualitative thematic analysis of a case study [25] of Vanessa Nakate. It analyses publicly available texts, media interviews and online interactions sourced chiefly from YouTube, and social media threads on Facebook and Twitter. The paper is part of a larger project that seeks to understand environmental activist representations in Africa, focusing on how environmental activism is undermined and how activists deploy agency. The project covers activism in several areas, including the ‘water wars’, sanitation, air pollution, and climate change, and builds on two previous studies focusing on the cropped out incident. The first focused on the media denial of racism following the incident [1]. The second analysed the difficulty of raising and sustaining accusations of racism in talk [5]. This paper is broader in its scope, includes other data sources than media interviews, and is not limited to the cropped out incident. It also adopts a different analysis (explained below) that focuses mainly on social binds and evaluative and projective agency rather than an analysis of discourse and talk.

### 2.2. Sampling and Sample

The study utilised purposive criterion sampling [26] to identify data. Inclusion criteria included online writings about Vanessa, videos of interactions with Vanessa, and social media posts (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) and their subsequent threads. The data source must have been in English, interactions must have related to the cropped out or letter writing controversies (to identify the range of ways Vanessa is undermined and deploys her agency), texts must have focused on her activism, and the data must have been sufficiently rich to allow for meaningful analysis (for example, a media headline with a short by-line was insufficient). Data were excluded if they were duplicates, did not allow for sufficient interaction (for example, a headline), were not sufficiently focused on her activism, and were not in English.

Google search terms included Vanessa Nakate, activism, climate change, controversy, youth, gender, letter, and cropped out. There was no time limitation as Vanessa’s activism commenced in December 2018 and gained traction in 2019. Vanessa’s Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube pages were also actively searched. During the initial identification phase, the study identified 151 potential data sources. However, after applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the final sample included 29 video interviews ranging in length from 1 to 31 min, 21 media articles written about Vanessa, and 13 Twitter and Facebook threads. Interviews and video data were transcribed using orthographic transcription conventions [27], while social posts were collated and saved.



### 2.3. Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis [27,28]. The analysis focused on identifying the roles and representations made available to the actors, emphasising how they facilitated or foreclosed the positions open to Vanessa. Importantly, the analysis also focused on how Vanessa actively drew on her agency to reframe and forge new representations of African women youth activists. The data and transcripts were read repeatedly to allow the author to get familiar with patterns. The author then developed semantic and latent codes to describe the data. Those codes were then used to build the three themes (labelled as ‘binds’ below) presented in the findings section below. As an example of the analysis procedure, for the theme called ‘gender bind’, the author developed both semantic (codes that appear on the surface) and latent (researcher generated) codes to understand how gender is used to undermine Vanessa and how Vanessa deploys her agency to resist, reframe, and reimagine the gendered nature of her activism. These codes were then brought together in a theme called ‘gender binds’—the central organising concept that brings the codes together.

### 2.4. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness and maintaining the integrity of the analysis was an essential feature of the study [29]. The author endeavoured to do a rigorous analysis of the data corpus. Because thematic analysis is pattern-based, the data were carefully analysed for patterns across data sources. The author also attempted to identify alternative or contradictory accounts for the pattern-based codes. The author also actively engaged with collaborators of the broader project to soundboard ideas, coherence and alternative interpretations. Figure 2 represents the methodology. It is essential to mention that the analysis was linear and sequential but sometimes involved iteration between the steps.

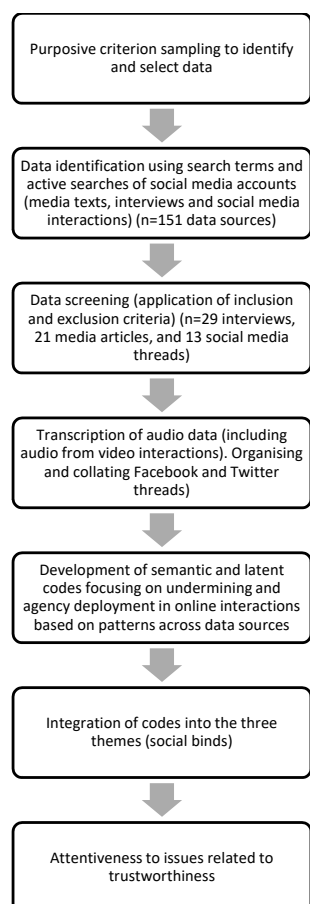


Figure 2. Methodology flowchart.

### 3. Findings: The Triple Bind

#### 3.1. Race, Ethnicity, Indigeneity and Place

Vanessa has actively represented 'Africa' in global youth activism. However, her 'Africanness' has also represented a bind. To the western gaze, her 'Africanness' is important because it draws attention to the plight of Africa. As Vanessa consistently emphasises, countries in Africa are among the lowest contributors to climate change but are disproportionately affected by a warming planet. At the same time, however, her Africanness limits her ability to speak about global issues, a feature of *global* climate change activism. A further risk is that Africa is simplistically represented in evocations of Africa. She has, however, been very quick to point out that Africa is not monolithic. For example, in a media interview with actress Angelina Jolie as part of a Time Magazine interview series, Angelina tended to speak of African issues and African women in simplistic terms. Vanessa interjects to point out that '*Africa is not a country*'. In addition to drawing attention to disproportionate impacts, she also actively educates Global North audiences about the complexities of Africa. Importantly, Vanessa actively brings discussions back to disproportional impacts and intersectional injustices. That is, that Africa cannot be viewed as a separate continent but is part of a global system of injustices.

A further risk of conflating Vanessa with Africa positions her as an 'add-on' and a 'special focus' in interactions in the Global North. The otherness of Vanessa also makes her vulnerable to actual exclusion. The cropped out incident revealed the ways Vanessa is excluded in mainstream representations of African youth climate activism. Not only was there was obvious exclusion (for example, being cropped out of a photograph), but the onus was placed on Vanessa to prove that those accusations were true [5]. While many agreed that the incident was racist and she indeed received much public support, she was also vilified by many, including the African press.

People questioned whether her accusation was indeed racism (she had to put in a lot of effort to 'prove' the accusation in media interviews). Some media also accused her of not having the right to speak on behalf of all Africans and that she was representing herself [1]. Some criticised her for speaking about global climate issues when she should stick to Africa, for there were many local issues that needed attention. Some accused her of thinking that she was above her station by associating with famous white climate activists like Greta Thunberg. She should not have put herself in that position in the first place. In a YouTube comments section, one commentator mentioned that '*She needs you all to know what happens when you go to their countries. When those people come to your homes, you treat them like gods and you trash your own. Learn to love your own please. Pay attention to each other and know that the solution of Africans is within the Africans themselves.*'

One cruel journalist even suggested that she was cropped out of the photo because she was not good enough of an activist to have been there. It was not racism, he said; it is that she was not good enough to be in the same photograph as the other 'good' activists who happen to be white [1]. She was there as a token, so she should not have been surprised to have been cropped out of the photograph. Still, others accused her of seeking attention because of self-interest and self-promotion and that she did not care for climate change in Africa. She was doing this for selfish reasons. Others questioned whether her emotions got the better of her, as tends to happen with young girls. I will return to this point below.

Interestingly, indigeneity has, to date, been virtually absent in interactions with audiences in the Global North. Unlike many other activists from marginalised communities where tribes and indigeneity are foregrounded, interactions with Vanessa are almost exclusively focused on 'Africa' as a geographical entity. It is difficult to say why this is the case. Perhaps, Africanness is so marginalised in the Global North that it does not even deserve a nuanced interpretation of indigeneity and tradition. On the contrary, African commentators and journalists have severely criticised Vanessa for not foregrounding her 'tribe' and 'indigeneity'. For how can she be African and not speak of her tribe or ethnicity?

In the comments section of a video interview with Vanessa after the cropped out incident, one commentator stated, 'You are an indigenous activist. You should be using in-

digenous name and portraying your naturalness, *including hair ...* ' Another commentator added, *'This woman is from Uganda, she has a Ugandan accent but Nakate is really not her name, she needs to use her tribal name!!!'* Both commentators suggest that Vanessa will have more credibility if she draws on her indigeneity rather than pretending to be on par with (white) activists in the Global North. Both commentators include personal markers as signifiers of her indigeneity. The first commentator suggested that her indigeneity should extend to how she wears her hair because, presumably, her hair is not 'natural' enough for them. The second commentator uses her accent as a marker for indigeneity. Thus, not using her tribal name and not having her hair in a natural state fundamentally undermines her position among white climate activists. For these commentators, it is impossible to be an African climate activist among white activists and not perform indigeneity—for indigeneity and being African are the same thing.

Vanessa's Africanness represents a bind on a continuum from overly African (her focus is/can only be limited to Africa) to not African enough (she needs to draw more on her indigeneity and local issues). Vanessa has navigated and skilfully undermined these binds. She often draws attention to African issues in the context of intersectional global injustice, but she has resisted attempts to draw her into essentialised discussions about indigeneity and has especially resisted the conflation of Africanness and indigeneity. For example, throughout the cropped out episode, commentators reminded her of the many tribal-related conflicts in Uganda and that she had no right to bring this up.

She reframes these criticisms to highlight the impact of systems and intersectional injustices. She draws on her in-situ evaluative agency to reframe these attempts to undermine her by using the rhetorical strategy of repetition. She consistently reframes and repeats the point that in situ personal critiques of her symbolise the treatment that African climate activists must *collectively* endure. She thus tactfully uses the criticism to draw attention to the present, to the collective and deploys her evaluative agency to reframe the criticism to make a point about injustices. Most importantly, she draws on her projective agency to put forward how (future) representation of African climate activists that transcend race, indigeneity, ethnicity and geopolitics—one where an African climate activist can make meaningful contributions to global debates, draw attention to Africa without necessarily being restricted to Africa, and at the same focus on local issues without being bound to restrictive ideas of indigeneity. This depends, of course, on the nature of the undermining and, importantly, the context. Vanessa skilfully deploys her agency contingent on context and the nature of the undermining. Significantly, she skilfully reframes critiques to influence the future representation of African women youth climate activists.

### 3.2. Gender Binds

Unsurprisingly, Vanessa's positioning is noticeably gendered. Vanessa, like other women activists, is often the victim of overtly misogynist personal abuse based on her appearance, including her hair, sexuality, and dress sense. In an interview with Vox, Vanessa recalls responses to her initial school strikes in 2018, *'From people saying that I had nothing [better] to do, to people saying that I have to stand on the streets because I'm probably trying to sell myself. Or maybe I've started taking really dangerous drugs, and that's what's taking me out into the street.'* Of course, a young man on the street would not receive such criticism. The only reason a young woman would be on the street would be because of her devious morality.

Gender equality has always been an important component of her activism. She continues to be a staunch advocate for girls' education and has been criticised for her deviations from normative African gendered positions. Vanessa explained in a Times Magazine interview that she attended a single-sex female high school where she was taught to foreground dignity and respect. When she started striking, her female friends thought that she was contradicting those values. In other words, she was being disrespectful and behaving in an undignified manner for a young Ugandan female. She suggests that gendered perceptions of activism were the reason why many of her friends took so long



to ‘ask questions about climate change’ and join her. This, she explains, is why her early activism work was ‘quite complicated’. She goes on to say that many of her friends started understanding and even joined her. Vanessa goes on to emphasise that ‘it is really complicated to do activism in my country’ because of this.

The most overtly sexist reactions to Vanessa, however, came in response to the handwritten letter to Joe Biden and Kamala Harris soon after they were elected to office. The letter (only) mentioned the impacts of climate change on women and girls, not boys. Consistent with criticisms after the cropped out incident, Vanessa was criticised for not focusing on local issues, for attention-seeking, for her audacity to write a handwritten letter to important people, and for its likely ineffectiveness. However, the most common vitriolic feedback focused on her ignoring men and boys. The backlash to the exclusion of men and boys was immense, with many Twitter users criticising her for this. One user, appropriately named ‘Men’s rights are also human rights’ suggested, ‘It’s not affecting women and children alone... It’s affecting every body under the sun and men are among them.’ Similarly, another user asked, ‘Vanessa. So the men aren’t affected Or they don’t exist...just asking.’ Another commented, ‘Boy child nowhere to be seen in this, hahaha Ugandans never disappoint.’

In addition to overtly sexist views, like other women activists, there is also a problematic view that Vanessa has innate virtues towards care, nurturing, kindness, and vulnerability. Vanessa’s positioning as ‘vulnerable’ is particularly interesting. The bind is that Vanessa should *perform* her vulnerability because, of course, she represents the most vulnerable in society (the African girl child); however, she cannot show that she is too vulnerable, for example, show too many emotions, because this is a weakness.

Unlike her contemporaries from the Global North, whose virtues are deemed closer to the masculine and empowered [16], Vanessa is included in Global North events precisely for her vulnerability. For example, during the Davos interviews, most journalists’ questions were directed at the white contemporaries. At one point in the Davos interview, sensing that Vanessa was noticeably side-lined by the media, Greta Thunberg redirected a question about the wildfires and animal deaths to Vanessa. To script, Vanessa brought the conversation back to how global injustices impact Africa, stating that while the wildfires in Australia were devastating, there have been devastating floods in Africa where millions of animals have died too; it is just that the media is biased in their reporting.

In this awkward interaction with a predominantly Global North audience, Greta reinforces the ‘vulnerability’ of Vanessa, who was quietly being side-lined and gave her the space to respond. However, instead of showing uncritical support for Australia’s wildlife, Vanessa drew on her agency to point out the media’s biased reporting against Africa. Again, Vanessa’s ability to read situations and reframe her positionality to draw attention to injustices is remarkable. Given her calm, quiet and respectful demeanour that could easily be misinterpreted as submissive and vulnerable, her pointed responses typically lead to stunned silence. It is one example of how she uses her political evaluative agency given the context to draw attention to global injustices and biased systems. Importantly, she showed that she was not simply there as the vulnerable ‘other’, but to point out the flawed assumptions of her audiences.

The gendered positioning of Vanessa was particularly pronounced after the cropped out incident. Vanessa was severely criticised for her emotional Twitter video, where she made the initial accusation of racism. She was accused of allowing her emotions to get the better of her and that her emotional propensity clouded her judgement [1]. In an interview after the incident, Vanessa described how she knew she would get emotional (cry), tried to calm down before making the video, and tried her best to suppress it. However, she became emotional and cried during the video. Thus, for Vanessa, crying would have been interpreted as a form of gendered weakness and embarrassment as she knew that ‘people’ would be watching.

However, who are the people who are ‘watching’? Whose gaze is judging her? In addition, why should she suppress her emotions in the first place? As anticipated, certain (unsurprisingly) male journalists and social media commentators criticised Vanessa for her

emotional reaction, suggesting that she should contain her emotions and that her emotions led her to make irrational claims [1]. She was positioned as emotionally volatile, thus fundamentally undermining her credibility. One journalist suggested that toughness was an inevitable part of being an activist; no one is stopping her from continuing to be an activist, so why should she cry? Crying and emotion was a flaw in her activist armoury and one that fundamentally undermined her credibility as an activist. For how can she represent such an important issue while she is emotional?

The situation was worsened by a powerful narrative that western female youth activists are constructed as ‘stronger’, less emotional, and more empowered [16]. This is important as it sets a tone for how a good activist should take criticism. As an example, Greta Thunberg was shunned by the then USA president in a highly publicised act. At the Davos event (where the cropped out incident occurred), a journalist asked Greta Thunberg about how she felt being publicly insulted by the then-president. The journalist asked, *‘what effect does that have on you?’*, and Greta Thunberg responds unemotionally and in a typically curt manner, *‘Of course, no effect’*. Her response draws laughter from the audience. She goes on, *‘We are we are being criticised like that all the time and of course if we would care about that then we wouldn’t be able to do what we do.’* The ability to handle criticism in an unemotional manner is seen as an essential virtue for female youth activists. Vanessa’s response contradicted this.

However, Vanessa skilfully navigated the attack on her perceived overly emotional response. She suggests that these emotions are motivated by more significant concerns than the mere exclusion of a single speech or photograph. Her emotional reaction was due to the silencing and oppression of all African people. What is at stake then, for her, is the erasure of the problems of an entire group of people rather than herself. Again, individual oppression is reframed as symbolic of collective oppression. Through this, she refocused the attention on systemic injustices in how Africa is portrayed. Vanessa also skilfully reframed the perceived weakness as a strength. She indicated that the reason she was emotional was that she was sincere. She links emotional responses to sincerity which she frames as an important virtue for climate activism. Importantly, she deploys her projective agency to evoke future-oriented imagery of more honest, authentic youth climate activism and, by implication, a more inclusive role for African women youth activists beyond the masculinised, emotionally tough white girl hero youth activist that has dominated climate activism.

### 3.3. Infantilising

Vanessa, like other activists, has navigated the many binds of ‘youth’. On one level, the evocation of youth activism creates privileges that come with the youth providing an intergenerational lens to climate change. However, youth can also be evoked by critics to undermine activists. Vanessa has experienced numerous attempts to infantilise her activism. Vanessa, like many other activists, is positioned between innocent and dangerous within conceptions of ‘youth’. The dangerous youth, of course, is an ever-present threat to conservative structures and feeds into broader patriarchal constructions of children as subservient, passive, apolitical and in need of guidance. In this view, children should steer clear of ‘dangerous’ politics, for example, supporting other social movements, speaking out against polluting industries, and performing disruptive politics, for that is the domain of adults and the state.

The tension between innocence and danger was exemplified in the letter incident. The letter was handwritten and meant to be a sign of sincerity. Vanessa later explained that she emulated Samantha Reed Smith, a then 10-year-old peace activist who wrote a letter to the leader of the Soviet Union during the Cold War in 1982. Vanessa indicated that she often draws inspiration from other activists’ strategies and wanted to emulate the letter in this instance. Indeed, the letter is very similar in tone and length. However, for some commentators, the letter was a sign of backwardness and embarrassment. Importantly, by writing a handwritten letter and sending it to the President and Vice President-Elect of the

USA, conservative commentators suggested that Vanessa was precocious. For how dare she write a handwritten letter to such important people?! She could have at least typed the letter! Importantly, for some, Vanessa showed her childlike naivety and disrespect by thinking she could reach Joe Biden and Kamala Harris through a handwritten letter and expect a response. Some saw it as an embarrassment for Africans and that Vanessa was feeding into stereotypes of Africans as backwards.

Vanessa's age and what it means in terms of how she behaves as a youth climate activist has also come under scrutiny. Vanessa's age as an 'older' youth activist (she was 23 when she started her activism) has also been contentious. For some conservative commentators, her reprehensible behaviour is typical of a precocious girl child, for example, seeking attention, crying, penning handwritten letters, and veering out of her lane. For one Twitter user, Vanessa *"is even 23 but writes like a 13year old, please respect the president and be formal. Please write back, are you serious?"* In the thread, when commentators defended Vanessa, one commentator replied, *"But honestly the handwriting is like for 7yr old."* Another commentator suggested that she should be in grade 2. Her handwriting, and her naivety in thinking that important people would listen to her, became a signifier that something was wrong with her cognitive age; she was acting out and did not deserve attention, as one would deal with a precocious child.

One commentator suggested, *"But are you really 23? Any way! In your struggle, also include boy child! Boys and men are also affected! At least you ought have included your boyfriend to represent boy child! Thank you."* Of particular interest here is not only the questioning of her behaviour given her age, but the assumption that at her age she has a boyfriend and an easy way to include men is to include her boyfriend. Not only does this statement assume heteronormative sexuality, but it is also based on the assumption that based on her claimed age, she should have a boyfriend. The commentator questions whether she is indeed 23, for if she was, she should have a boyfriend. If she had a boyfriend, she would have included boys in her letter. It is unlikely then that she has a boyfriend and, by implication, is not 23.

Vanessa has navigated infantilising attempts throughout her career. The undermining tactics assume that precocious children need not only be ignored for they are seeking attention, but that they can be guided and moulded by well-meaning adults. She is typically quiet in response to personal attacks on social media. However, in November 2020, she resisted infantilising trolling, particularly by those in her country in response. *"I have become a laughing stock in my own country for writing a letter to @KamalaHarris and @JoeBiden about demanding for an equitable and sustainable future for all of us- AND I AM LOVING IT!!! Keep the trolls coming [laughing emoji]."* This type of response is atypical of Vanessa but was a turning point to call out unfair infantilising attacks. *'I am loving it'* suggests that she is open and ready and even welcoming the infantilising attacks because she is emotionally 'strong' enough to manage them. Not only is she prepared to deal with it emotionally, but the welcoming trolls will make her stronger. The statement represented a signal of her strength and resilience in the face of severe undermining.

Vanessa has also skilfully developed new and varied opportunities for African women youth activists recognising the infantilising binds of youth activism especially. In an interview with Time Magazine, Vanessa explained her new movement called *Rise Up* movement as a place for older activists who do not comfortably identify as part of the youth climate movement. In addition, their emphasis goes beyond advocacy and raising awareness for climate justice, but also implementing 'real world' solutions such as solar energy and improved cookstoves to reduce their reliance on wood fuel. Vanessa has also increasingly enacted her focus on the intersectional justice of *systems*, that climate justice is directly linked to injustices directed to girls, black communities, and other minority groups. According to Vanessa, *'we need to work on the system that achieves equality for all of its people ... we cannot achieve climate justice without social justice ...'* The emphasis on *doing* is a deliberate attempt to solve issues, but also to enact climate change advocacy. She draws on her evaluative agency, for example, to crowdfund and implement actual projects. Her ability to draw parallels to systems of racial justice and gender justice is also a signifier of

her activism. In addition, her agility to create platforms where other young people can participate without being pigeonholed is a sign of her activism. In doing so, she effectively undermines criticism that she is self-absorbed, only interested in talking (and not doing), and is behaving like a precocious child.

#### 4. Discussion

This study contributes to our knowledge of how youth activists evoke and negotiate their agency in relation to pervasive social binds [1–3]. It is the first study to closely examine both undermining *and* agency in African women youth climate activists. It builds on previous studies that have focused on agency among youth climate activists more broadly [6,7] and those in the Global South specifically [1,5,10]. The findings concur with earlier studies about how youth activists are undermined and the temporal and situated agency strategies used to resist and subvert those criticisms. A significant contribution of this study is that it shows how projective agency is deployed to reimagine a role for African women youth climate activists. Despite significant attempts to undermine her, Vanessa's activism has continued to strengthen. Sadly, her activism has developed on the back of intense criticism, undermining and vilification. In a New York Times article, she recently said of the cropped out incident that *'I think what really helped me become what I am today is the fact that I spoke up and the fact that people responded with support.'* Vanessa has skillfully and deliberately drawn on her personal, temporal and political agency to carve out a space for African women youth climate activism. Importantly she has managed to navigate the triple binds that have limited and dissuaded many young African women from climate activism.

Vanessa is particularly adept at reframing in-situ criticisms to bring into focus intersectional (in)justices. Depending on how the criticism is levelled, she reframes the criticism to focus on intersectional justice. For example, if she is excluded based on being African, she reframes this as an example of how the Western gaze is biased against African climate activism. If she is accused of ignoring local issues (not African enough), she reframes this to demonstrate how global climate is linked to local issues. If she is being marginalised because of her gender, she reframes this to point out how African women are side-lined in mainstream debates.

She does this with clarity and purpose that usually disarms critics. Once she has warded off the criticisms, she drives home the point she is trying to make. It is a pity that she first must do the hard work of justifying and warding off criticisms before she is able to do her activism [5]. However, she strengthens her activism by pointing out how the criticism is usually a sign of a broader injustice. Vanessa is equally adept at reframing criticisms levelled at her values. Vanessa's activism draws heavily on her personal life narrative. She often reframes criticisms such as being emotional into a positive value such as commitment, authenticity, and sincerity. For Vanessa, personal (criticism) is reframed as a political opportunity. Most importantly, she deploys her projective agency to offer more emancipatory imagery and representations for African women youth climate activists that has important implications for social action.

Vanessa has also recently initiated projects to improve the lives of poor girls. Her activism extends beyond raising awareness and demonstrates practical interventions that will simultaneously reduce carbon emissions and significantly improve the lives of young people, especially girls in school. Vanessa is also passionate about representations of African youth climate activists and has initiated a project to collate the narratives of African youth climate activists. Three things are striking about Vanessa Nakate: her remarkable agency in navigating the binds that restrict African women youth climate activism, her ability to conceptualise projects that exemplify her focus on intersectional justice, and her commitment to capacitate other activists.

On a practical level, the findings of this study may be significant in work on mobilising youth activists [18,19]. The results may be particularly useful in facilitating youth activist preparedness for activism. By understanding how African women youth activists are

undermined and how to reclaim power, activists can prepare for how to manage this. Activists may draw inspiration from Vanessa's responses to attempts at undermining her. Activists may also draw inspiration from her practical projects that have important real-world benefits as well as climate change impacts. Lastly, Vanessa's focus on capacitation and peer learning from other activists is noteworthy. Vanessa Nakate exemplifies not only what to focus on (systems, intersectional justice, and upstream issues) but also provides practical examples for how to forge new representations for African women in youth climate activism.

Limitations of this study include the fact that it was a case study focusing on a single activist. This may limit how much can be said about other activists, African or otherwise. While there undoubtedly will be differences, case studies are not unique in climate activist studies, and it is hoped that some findings may be transferable to similar contexts. A further limitation is that it tends to reinforce the construction of the glamorous individual activist who single-handedly makes a difference. Not only does this undermine collective agency by focusing on an individual, but it also ignores the 'everyday' activism that occurs on a daily basis, especially in ways that youth would never frame as 'activism' in the first place. It is possible that the author's subjectivity may have influenced the findings.

Future research could aim to investigate agency in other African women youth climate activists to develop our theoretical understandings of the concept. We have only superficially engaged theoretically with agency and youth climate activism, particularly how agency intersects with 'structure' in everyday activism. Similar research could also be conducted in other marginalised communities around the world. There is a need for scholarship that frames agency in ways, for example, through life story writing like others have done [30]. Importantly, studies could investigate the extent to which positive representations of African women youth climate activists strengthen climate activism and civic engagement on the continent and beyond.

## 5. Conclusions

Unsurprisingly, Vanessa's forthcoming book is titled 'A Bigger Picture: My Fight to Bring a New African Voice to the Climate Crisis'. In my work with young climate activists, Vanessa's activism is used as a 'new voice' to demonstrate that African youth are not powerless in climate activism. While activism can be difficult and activists will be undermined, they have individual, temporal and political agency to reclaim power. Vanessa's case also holds scholarly value in understanding constructions of childhood, gender, and climate activism. It is hoped that this study will stimulate more interest in agency among youth activists in Africa and in similar contexts. More than anything, it is hoped that it contributes to the sustained and meaningful growth of African women youth in climate activism.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethical review and approval were waived for this study, due to the fact that the study is based on publicly available information.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Rafaely, D.; Barnes, B. African climate activism, media and the denial of racism: The tacit silencing of Vanessa Nakate. *Community Psychol. Glob. Perspect.* **2020**, *19*, 71–86.
2. Raby, R.; Sheppard, L.C. Constructs of childhood, generation and heroism in editorials on young people's climate change activism: Their mobilisation and effects. *Child. Soc.* **2021**, *35*, 380–394. [[CrossRef](#)]
3. de Moor, J.; De Vyd, M.; Uba, K.; Wahlström, M. New kids on the block: Taking stock of the recent cycle of climate activism. *Soc. Mov. Stud.* **2021**, *20*, 619–625. [[CrossRef](#)]
4. Fisher, D.R.; Nasrin, S. Climate activism and its effects. *Wiley Interdiscip. Rev. Clim. Chang.* **2021**, *12*, e683. [[CrossRef](#)]



5. Rafaely, D. 'Cropped out': The collaborative production of an accusation of racism. *Discourse Stud.* **2021**, *23*, 324–338. [[CrossRef](#)]
6. Feldman, H.R. A rhetorical perspective on youth environmental activism. *J. Sci. Commun.* **2020**, *19*, C07. [[CrossRef](#)]
7. Nolas, S.; Varvantakisa, C.; Aruldoss, V. (Im)possible conversations? Activism, childhood and everyday life. *J. Soc. Political Psychol.* **2016**, *4*, 252–265. [[CrossRef](#)]
8. Burman, E. *Developments: Child, Image, Nation*, 2nd ed.; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2020; pp. 134–151.
9. Holmberg, A.; Alvinus, A. Children's protest in relation to the climate emergency: A qualitative study on a new form of resistance promoting political and social change. *Childhood* **2020**, *27*, 78–92. [[CrossRef](#)]
10. Börner, S.; Kraftl, P.; Giatti, L.L. Blurring the '-ism' in youth climate crisis activism: Everyday agency and practices of marginalised youth in the Brazilian urban periphery. *Child. Geogr.* **2021**, *19*, 275–283. [[CrossRef](#)]
11. Trott, C.D. What difference does it make? Exploring the transformative potential of everyday climate crisis activism by children and youth. *Child. Geogr.* **2021**, *19*, 300–308. [[CrossRef](#)]
12. Weadock, C. @GretaThunberg: Navigating Critique and Identity within Youth Climate Activism on Twitter. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Denver, Denver, CO, USA, 2020.
13. Emirbayer, M.; Mische, A. What is agency? *Am. J. Sociol.* **1998**, *103*, 962–1023. [[CrossRef](#)]
14. James, A. Agency. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*; Palgrave Macmillan: London, UK, 2009; pp. 34–45.
15. Ludlow, F.; Baker, L.; Brock, S.; Hebdon, C.; Dove, M.R. The double binds of indigeneity and indigenous resistance. *Humanities* **2016**, *5*, 53. [[CrossRef](#)]
16. Ahearn, L.M. Language and agency. *Annu. Rev. Anthropol.* **2001**, *30*, 109–137. [[CrossRef](#)]
17. Adams, M. Critical psychologies and climate change. *Curr. Opin. Psychol.* **2021**, *42*, 13–18. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
18. Riemer, M.; Reich, S.M. Community psychology and global climate change: Introduction to the special section. *Am. J. Community Psychol.* **2011**, *47*, 349–353. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
19. Fernandes-Jesus, M.; Barnes, B.; Diniz, R.F. Communities reclaiming power and social justice in the face of climate change. *Community Psychol. Glob. Perspect.* **2020**, *6*, 1–21.
20. Nkrumah, B. Eco-Activism: Youth and Climate Justice in South Africa. *Environ. Claims J.* **2020**, *5*, 1–23. [[CrossRef](#)]
21. Chersich, M.F.; Scorgie, F.; Wright, C.Y.; Mullick, S.; Mathee, A.; Hess, J.; Richter, M.; Rees, H. Climate change and adolescents in South Africa: The role of youth activism and the health sector in safeguarding adolescents' health and education. *S. Afr. Med. J.* **2019**, *109*, 615–619. [[CrossRef](#)]
22. Cherry, L. The power of positive role models: Youth climate activism in films. *J. Environ. Stud. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 211–216. [[CrossRef](#)]
23. Burman, E.; Stacey, J. The child and childhood in feminist theory. *Fem. Theory* **2010**, *11*, 227–240. [[CrossRef](#)]
24. Arora-Jonsson, S. Virtue and vulnerability: Discourses on women, gender and climate change. *Glob. Environ. Chang.* **2011**, *21*, 744–751. [[CrossRef](#)]
25. Yin, R.K. *Applications of Case Study Research*; Sage: London, UK, 2011.
26. Emmel, N. Purposeful sampling. In *Sampling and Choosing Cases in Qualitative Research: A Realist Approach*; SAGE Research Methods Series; Sage: London, UK, 2013; pp. 33–45.
27. Braun, V.; Clarke, V. *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*; Sage: London, UK, 2013.
28. Clarke, V.; Braun, V. Thematic analysis. In *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*; Teo, T., Ed.; Springer: New York, NY, USA, 2014; pp. 1947–1952.
29. Levitt, H.M.; Motulsky, S.L.; Wertz, F.J.; Morrow, S.L.; Ponterotto, J.G. Recommendations for designing and reviewing qualitative research in psychology: Promoting methodological integrity. *Qual. Psychol.* **2017**, *4*, 2. [[CrossRef](#)]
30. Martínez García, A.B. Constructing an activist self: Greta Thunberg's climate activism as life writing. *Prose Stud.* **2020**, *41*, 349–366. [[CrossRef](#)]