

Symbolic Annihilation: Analyzing Associated Press's Erasure of Vanessa Nakate and Marginalization of Black Women Activists

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Abstract

This study examines the exclusion of Vanessa Nakate, a Ugandan climate activist, from a group photo published by the Associated Press (AP) during the 2020 World Economic Forum. Using the muted group theory, it explores the implications of Nakate's omission as the sole Black individual in the image, shedding light on the broader issue of symbolic annihilation faced by Black women activists in Western media. Through visual and textual analysis, the study reveals the power dynamics and biases behind AP's decision to crop Nakate, fueling subsequent controversy. Furthermore, the paper examines AP's response to the backlash, analyzing their strategies to rebuild their reputation, including issuing an apology and releasing the original photograph.

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Plain language summary**Erasure of Black women activists from media: A review**

This paper looks at a photo from the 2020 World Economic Forum where a Ugandan climate activist named Vanessa Nakate was cropped out. The paper uses “muted group theory” to explain how this might have happened and what it means. It argues that Nakate was left out because she’s a Black woman and that this is part of a bigger problem where the media often ignores or overlooks Black women activists. The focus is on the broader issue of symbolic annihilation experienced by Black women activists in Western media. Using visual and textual analysis, the study uncovers the power dynamics and biases influencing AP’s decision to crop Nakate, sparking subsequent controversy. Additionally, the paper scrutinizes AP’s response to the criticism, examining their strategies to rebuild their reputation, which include issuing an apology and releasing the original photograph. Overall, the paper is about how powerful media organizations can be and how important it is to be aware of the biases they might have. It is also about the importance of giving Black women activists a voice and making sure their stories are heard.

Keywords

erasure, cropped photo, racism, Associated Press: AP, Vanessa Nakate, climate change

Introduction

The representation and visibility of marginalized groups in the media play a crucial role in shaping public narratives on important issues such as climate change and social justice. This study examines a notable incident of symbolic annihilation in the media, focusing on the exclusion of Vanessa Nakate, a Ugandan climate activist, from a group photo published by the Associated Press (AP) during the 2020 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Nakate’s omission as the sole Black individual in the image raises important questions about the representation and recognition of Black women activists in Western media.

The analysis in this study will be conducted within the framework of the muted group theory (Ardener, 2005), which asserts that certain groups are muted or marginalized in political debates and public discourse. By applying this theory, this study aims to explore the power dynamics and biases that

underlie Nakate's erasure and the broader issue of the symbolic annihilation of Black women activists.

The Exclusion of Vanessa Nakate

The exclusion of Vanessa Nakate from the group photo published by the Associated Press (AP) during the 2020 World Economic Forum in Davos sparked widespread outrage and highlighted the systemic erasure of Black women activists in Western media. To understand the significance of Nakate's exclusion, it is essential to examine the context and events leading up to the incident.

Vanessa Nakate, a Ugandan business graduate turned climate activist, had been staging solitary protests along busy roads in Uganda, urging government officials to address climate change and environmental degradation (Kisakye, 2019). Her actions, initially unnoticed, continued for over 6 months, demonstrating her determination to bring attention to the urgent need for action.

In January 2020, Nakate received a prestigious invitation to join renowned female climate activists from around the world at the World Economic Forum in Davos (Earthday, 2020). This group included prominent figures like Greta Thunberg of Sweden. As one of the few representatives from the Global South and the only Black person in the group, Nakate saw this as an opportunity to amplify the voices of African climate activists on the global stage (Earthday, 2020).

At that event in Davos, Switzerland, several young activists gave their opinion regarding climate actions. Leading medias from all over the world published stories differently based on their comments, activities, etc. Vanessa Nakate was one of the activists and speakers at that event. She also made some comments and offered opinions during her session. Though AP did not publish any specific comment on Vanessa Nakate's speech, they published a story of another Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg's press conference. However, in that article, they mentioned the name of other climate activists present along with her (Greta Thunberg); Vanessa Nakate from Uganda, Luisa Neubauer from Germany, Loukina Tille from Switzerland, and Isabelle Axelsson from Sweden. Vanessa Nakate was in the middle and sat near Greta Thunberg at that press conference. Later, they joined in a movement for climate awareness. AP posted eight images representing the various parts of the event in that article. In addition, AP captured photos of five environmental activists from the event where they were standing together (Keaten & Pylas, 2020).

However, when AP published eight photos of that event in a slider, on the fifth photo of that slider, they cropped Vanessa Nakate from the picture. Vanessa Nakate was shocked when she saw she had been cut from the image

(Bauder, 2020). This erasure was a stark reminder of the longstanding issue of marginalization faced by Black women activists in Western media (Matthews, 2020).

The exclusion of Nakate from the photograph had immediate and far-reaching consequences. It sent a powerful message that her voice and experiences as a young African woman were deemed insignificant or unworthy of representation. This erasure not only invalidated Nakate's presence at the World Economic Forum but also undermined the experiences and struggles of Black women activists worldwide (Budryk, 2020).

Nakate responded to the exclusion through social media, accusing the AP of racism and bringing attention to the erasure of Black voices in the climate movement. Her actions sparked a global outcry, with individuals and organizations expressing solidarity and demanding accountability from the AP (Okereke & Busari, 2020).

Analyzing Symbolic Annihilation and the Muted Group Theory

The exclusion of Vanessa Nakate from the group photo published by the Associated Press (AP) during the 2020 World Economic Forum serves as a poignant example of symbolic annihilation, a phenomenon where certain groups are silenced, ignored, or erased in media representations (Tuchman, 2000). The muted group theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the underlying dynamics and power imbalances that contribute to this marginalization (Ardener, 2005).

The muted group theory, developed by sociologist Edwin Ardener, asserts that certain groups, particularly those with less power and influence in society, have their voices and experiences marginalized or muted in public discourse. This theory highlights the ways in which dominant groups control and shape communication channels, making it difficult for marginalized groups to have their perspectives acknowledged and heard.

Applying the muted group theory to the case of Vanessa Nakate's exclusion reveals the power dynamics and biases at play. Nakate's erasure from the photograph not only silenced her voice but also perpetuated the systemic marginalization of Black women activists. This erasure is reflective of a broader pattern in Western media, where Black women's contributions to social and environmental movements are often downplayed (Van Dijk, 2015).

Black women activists face intersecting forms of oppression based on race and gender, which further compounds their experiences of symbolic annihilation (Gurrieri, 2021; Solis, 2018). They encounter multiple barriers in having their voices heard and their perspectives valued within mainstream media

narratives. As a result, their stories and insights are frequently overshadowed, limiting the diversity and inclusivity of public discourse (Dralega, 2018).

The symbolic annihilation of Black women activists has significant consequences (Coleman & Yochim, 2008). Firstly, it reinforces existing power imbalances and perpetuates the dominance of certain voices and perspectives. By omitting the experiences and insights of Black women activists, media outlets contribute to the marginalization of these groups and perpetuate a skewed representation of reality. Secondly, the erasure of Black women activists undermines their credibility and expertise. It sends a message that their contributions are not worth of recognition, ultimately devaluing their work and hindering progress on critical issues such as climate change and social justice (Collins, 2004; Gutsche et al., 2022). This erasure not only affects individual activists like Nakate but also stifles the broader impact of their activism on society.

The Symbolic Annihilation of Black Women Activists in Western Media

The exclusion of Vanessa Nakate from the group photo published by the Associated Press (AP) during the 2020 World Economic Forum is not an isolated incident but rather emblematic of a broader issue—the symbolic annihilation of Black women activists in Western media. This section delves deeper into this phenomenon, exploring its historical roots, contemporary manifestations, and the implications for public perception and social change.

The historical marginalization of Black women in media can be traced back to colonial times when their voices and experiences were systematically erased or distorted (Carbado et al., 2013). Black women were depicted through harmful stereotypes that portrayed them as either hypersexualized or as servants to white individuals, reinforcing racist and sexist ideologies. These depictions not only perpetuated harmful biases but also positioned Black women as invisible in public discourse (Watson et al., 2019).

The harmful stereotypes perpetuated in historical media have taken various forms. The Jezebel stereotype, portraying Black women as hypersexualized figures, and the Mammy stereotype, depicting them as submissive caretakers, were prevalent. The Sapphire stereotype reinforced the notion of Black women as aggressive and confrontational. These stereotypes not only distorted the experiences of Black women but also contributed to their symbolic annihilation by perpetuating narrow and harmful narratives.

Today, the symbolic annihilation of Black women activists continues through limited representation and erasure in mainstream media. While Black

women have been at the forefront of social and environmental movements, their contributions are often downplayed or overshadowed (Brooks, 2008). The voices of Black women activists are consistently marginalized, with their experiences and perspectives receiving minimal attention in media narratives (Mehra et al., 2004).

Western media has a long history of erasing and criminalizing marginalized communities, particularly Black communities. This is due in part to the implicit racial bias of journalists and producers, who often shape media narratives based on stereotypes about Blacks. This bias has led to the overreporting of crime stories involving Black suspects, the use of pejorative terms like “thug” and “animal” to describe Black protesters, and the framing of Blacks as threats worthy of full-riot-gear police, National Guard, and wall-to-wall media coverage. This biased coverage has had a direct link to increased fear and prejudice against Blacks and has helped to perpetuate a dangerous cycle of racism in society (Savali, 2015). Even western media has accusations to cover stories and faces that go with their interest, not from humanity or any truth perspectives. Kastner (2018) explained this more briefly, how western media portrayed Malala Yousafzai, but they ignored other girls’, maybe because of those girl Palestinian origins. But it is not just people or race; sometimes the whole continent can be a part of systemic and institutional erasure. Eko (2010) studied on internet connection in Africa, which was mostly funded by the countries from Africa itself, but because of the systematic erasure nature, Boston-based newspaper portrayed US as such as bringing the Internet to Africa, helping Africa to get online. It is not surprising that Africa was portrayed as “The Dark Continent.” (Eko, 2010, p. 194).

This type of erasure has significant consequences for public perception and policy discussions. When Black women activists are excluded or silenced, it reinforces the idea that their struggles and insights are less valuable or relevant. This undermines their credibility and diminishes the urgency of the issues they advocate for, perpetuating existing power imbalances (Carbado et al., 2013; Patton, 2006).

Moreover, the erasure of Black women activists reinforces the dominance of white voices and experiences, narrowing the scope of public discourse (Mehra et al., 2004; Patton, 2006). It creates a skewed narrative that fails to reflect the diverse realities and perspectives of those affected by climate change and other social injustices. This limited representation hinders progress toward meaningful social change by excluding vital voices from the conversation.

The symbolic annihilation of Black women activists also has an impact on the activism landscape itself. The erasure of their contributions can discourage other Black women from engaging in activism, as they may perceive

their voices to be less valued or influential. This further perpetuates the cycle of underrepresentation and limits the potential for collective action and transformative change (Carbado et al., 2013; Watson et al., 2019).

Media Response and Reputation Management

The exclusion of Vanessa Nakate from the group photo published by the Associated Press (AP) during the 2020 World Economic Forum ignited a global outcry and forced the media organization to respond to the controversy. This section examines the AP's response to the backlash, focusing on their efforts to salvage their reputation and address the erasure of Nakate.

In the wake of the public outrage, the AP took steps to acknowledge and rectify their mistake. They issued an apology to Nakate and acknowledged the significance of her presence at the World Economic Forum. The apology expressed regret for the cropping of Nakate from the photo, recognizing it as an oversight that should not have happened. The AP acknowledged the importance of inclusive representation and committed to taking measures to avoid such errors in the future (Bauder, 2020).

Additionally, the AP released the original photograph containing Nakate, ensuring that her presence was acknowledged and visible. By taking this step, the AP aimed to correct the misrepresentation and give Nakate the recognition she deserved. However, it is important to note that the damage caused by the initial exclusion cannot be undone completely, as the erasure had already sent a powerful message of exclusion and marginalization (Easton, 2020).

The AP's response to the controversy reflects their recognition of the need to address issues of representation and equity in media coverage. It demonstrates the significance of public pressure and the role of social media in holding media organizations accountable for their actions. The backlash prompted the AP to confront their biases and take steps toward rectifying their mistake, albeit after the fact.

From a reputation management perspective, the AP's response aimed to mitigate the damage caused by the controversy and repair their tarnished image (Associated Press, 2020; Matthews, 2020). The organization realized the importance of addressing the concerns of their audience and stakeholders. Their apology and the release of the original photograph were strategic moves to regain public trust and demonstrate a commitment to inclusive representation (Miller, 2020).

However, it is essential to critically examine the motives and sincerity behind the AP's response. The fact that Nakate was cropped out in the first place raises questions about the underlying biases and lack of diversity within the organization (Bauder, 2020). The incident sheds light on the systemic

issues that lead to the symbolic annihilation of marginalized groups, particularly Black women activists, in Western media.

While the AP's response was a necessary step toward reconciliation, it should not overshadow the larger problem at hand. The erasure of Nakate highlights a broader pattern of marginalization faced by Black women activists, which must be addressed beyond individual apologies and corrective actions.

How Vanessa Nakate Reacted?

Vanessa Nakate reacted to her exclusion from the group photo published by the Associated Press (AP) with a strong response. She took to social media to express her disappointment and accuse the AP of racism. Here is an overview of how Nakate responded to the incident:

Social media posts: Nakate used her social media platforms, particularly Twitter, to share her thoughts and feelings about the exclusion. She posted side-by-side comparisons of the cropped photo and the original, highlighting the erasure of her presence (Twitter, 2020b). Nakate expressed her frustration and disbelief, emphasizing the importance of representation and the need to address racial biases (Evelyn, 2020; Srikanth, 2020; Twitter, 2020a).

Accusation of racism: In her social media posts and subsequent interviews, Nakate accused the AP of racism, alleging that her exclusion from the photo was a deliberate act. She highlighted the fact that she was the only Black person in the group, further emphasizing the racial dynamics at play (Evelyn, 2020). Nakate's accusation sparked a global conversation and drew attention to the broader issue of the symbolic annihilation of Black women activists in Western media.

Demand for accountability: Nakate called for accountability from the AP and urged them to address the erasure and take responsibility for their actions (Esfandiari & Martin, 2020; Okereke & Busari, 2020). She emphasized the importance of diverse representation and the need for media organizations to recognize their biases and rectify their mistakes. Nakate's demand for accountability resonated with many who saw her exclusion as part of a larger pattern of marginalization in the media (Dahir, 2021).

Nakate's response to her exclusion was courageous and vocal. By leveraging social media platforms, she brought attention to the issue and sparked a broader conversation about representation and racial biases in media. Her accusation of racism prompted the AP to respond and take steps to rectify the situation.

It is worth noting that Nakate's response also drew support and solidarity from activists, journalists, and the public worldwide. Her activism and advocacy for climate justice gained further visibility as a result of the controversy, and she has continued to use her platform to raise awareness about climate change and the importance of diverse representation in environmental movements (Budryk, 2020; Esfandiari & Martin, 2020; McCarthy et al., 2020).

In addition to her initial response, Nakate has continued to be a vocal advocate for climate justice and inclusive representation. She has participated in interviews, spoken at conferences, and engaged in activism to raise awareness about the urgency of addressing climate change and the importance of amplifying diverse voices, particularly those of marginalized communities. Nakate's reaction to the incident showcased her resilience and determination to use her platform to effect change. She transformed the controversy into an opportunity to shed light on the marginalization faced by Black women activists and to emphasize the necessity of their inclusion in conversations surrounding climate change and environmental justice.

Furthermore, Nakate's response sparked discussions about the larger issue of symbolic annihilation, not just in the context of her own experience but also within Western media as a whole. Her case served as a poignant example of the ways in which Black women activists are often sidelined or overlooked, reinforcing existing power dynamics and perpetuating marginalization. By speaking out and demanding accountability, Nakate contributed to the broader discourse on representation and equity in media coverage. Her actions inspired others to question the biases and structural barriers that contribute to the symbolic annihilation of marginalized groups.

Discussion

The controversy surrounding Vanessa Nakate's exclusion from the AP group photo at the 2020 World Economic Forum in Davos sparked a significant discussion about representation, media biases, and the symbolic annihilation of Black women activists in Western media. This incident highlighted the pervasive challenges faced by marginalized groups in gaining visibility and recognition within the climate activism movement and broader societal discourse.

One key aspect of the discussion revolved around the concept of symbolic annihilation, which refers to the systematic erasure of certain groups in media representation. Nakate's exclusion exemplified this phenomenon, as she was the only Black person cropped out of the photo, thereby erasing her presence and diminishing the importance of her activism. This incident shed light on the larger issue of underrepresentation and marginalization faced by Black

women activists, whose voices and contributions often go unnoticed or undervalued.

The muted group theory provided a valuable framework for analyzing this incident. According to the theory, certain groups, such as women and people of color, are marginalized and their perspectives are often muted in political debates and mainstream media. Nakate's exclusion exemplified this theory, as she was silenced and rendered invisible in a prominent media portrayal of climate activists. This incident underscored the urgent need to challenge and dismantle the structures and biases that perpetuate the muted group status of marginalized communities.

The response from Nakate, other climate activists, and media outlets played a crucial role in shaping the discussion. Nakate's reaction was powerful, as she utilized social media platforms to express her disappointment, accuse the AP of racism, and demand accountability. Her response not only highlighted the injustice she personally experienced but also drew attention to the broader issue of underrepresentation and symbolic annihilation of Black women activists. This incident served as a catalyst for a larger conversation about the need for diverse representation and equitable media coverage.

Media outlets and climate activists responded with solidarity and criticism of the AP's decision. They highlighted the biases and systemic barriers within the media industry, called for greater diversity and inclusion, and emphasized the importance of recognizing and amplifying the voices of marginalized groups. The incident prompted introspection within media organizations and contributed to ongoing discussions about the need for systemic change.

In addition to the erasure of diverse perspectives, the cropping of Nakate from this picture also highlights poor journalism (Rafaely & Barnes, 2020). This can be connected to a long history of poor journalism regarding the way Black women are written about in media (Sanders, 2015). The act of selectively editing Nakate out of the photograph not only symbolically annihilated her presence but also raises questions about the journalistic integrity and editorial decision-making at play.

Examples from history further emphasize the long-standing issue of poor journalism perpetuating racial biases. During the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, media outlets often portrayed Black activists in ways that reinforced racial stereotypes, manipulating images to depict peaceful demonstrations as agitators (Verney, 2012). The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 witnessed biased framing, with media focusing disproportionately on distressing images of Black individuals, contributing to negative racial narratives (Tyree & Hill, 2016).

Recent protests against police brutality and systemic racism have also been marred by biased media coverage, where images emphasizing violence or looting, without context, perpetuated stereotypes about Black activists. Instances from political campaigns show how Black candidates have been portrayed through selective cropping to reinforce racial biases, distorting public perceptions (Clément, 2022; Lawrence, 2022).

Addressing poor journalism in this context involves not only acknowledging the mistake but also reflecting on the broader systemic issues within the media industry. It prompts a necessary conversation about the responsibility of media outlets to challenge their own biases, diversify their perspectives, and ensure fair and accurate representation. The incident serves as a call for media organizations to reevaluate their editorial processes, implement diversity training, and actively work toward dismantling the ingrained structures that contribute to the perpetuation of poor journalism, especially when it comes to the portrayal of marginalized communities, such as Black women activists.

The AP's subsequent response, including an apology and the release of the original photograph, was an important step toward addressing the controversy. However, it is crucial to recognize that this incident is just one example of a larger systemic issue. The discussion surrounding Nakate's exclusion must continue to drive lasting change within the media landscape. Efforts should focus on diversifying newsrooms, confronting biases, and ensuring equitable representation of all voices.

Conclusion

The exclusion of Vanessa Nakate from the Associated Press (AP) group photo during the 2020 World Economic Forum in Davos sparked a global conversation about media representation, symbolic annihilation, and the experiences of Black women activists. This incident served as a catalyst for examining the broader issues of underrepresentation, biases, and power dynamics within the climate activism movement and Western media.

The literature review reveals that symbolic annihilation, a concept rooted in the feminist and critical media studies, highlights the erasure and marginalization of certain groups in media narratives. Black women activists, like Nakate, often face multiple forms of oppression due to their race, gender, and social position (Gurrieri, 2021; Solis, 2018). Intersectional frameworks emphasize the interconnected nature of these experiences and highlight the need for inclusive representation that accounts for the complex realities of individuals (Coleman & Yochim, 2008; Dralega, 2018).

Media biases, both conscious and unconscious, play a significant role in perpetuating symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 2000). The framing, positioning, and language used in media coverage can reinforce stereotypes, exclude marginalized voices, and limit the perspectives presented to the public. The exclusion of Nakate from the AP group photo underscores the historical patterns of underrepresentation and the lack of diversity within Western media.

The incident prompted a range of reactions, both from Nakate herself and other climate activists, as well as media outlets and the general public (Budryk, 2020; Keaten & Pylas, 2020; Srikanth, 2020). Nakate's vocal response on social media and her advocacy for climate justice and representation amplified the importance of inclusive media practices. The controversy compelled the AP to address the issue and attempt to rectify their mistake, showcasing the power of public pressure in holding media organizations accountable (Matthews, 2020).

However, the incident also highlights the systemic challenges faced by Black women activists in Western media. The limited visibility and symbolic annihilation of these individuals perpetuate narratives that exclude their perspectives, struggles, and achievements. It underscores the need for structural changes within media institutions to dismantle biases, promote inclusivity, and ensure equitable representation.

In conclusion, the exclusion of Vanessa Nakate from the AP group photo serves as a powerful example of the ongoing struggle for representation and the symbolic annihilation of Black women activists in Western media. It calls for a deeper examination of media practices, biases, and power dynamics, as well as a commitment to challenging systemic barriers and amplifying the voices of marginalized groups. By recognizing and rectifying these issues, the media can play a crucial role in shaping public narratives, fostering social justice, and driving meaningful change in the fight against climate change and environmental degradation.

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