

# An intersectional approach to climate justice activism

[ B O O K R E V I E W ]

Vanessa Nakate (2021). **A Bigger Picture: My Fight to Bring a New African Voice to the Climate Crisis.** Pan Macmillan. 304 pages. ISBN 13: 9780358654506

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Vanessa Nakate's **A Bigger Picture** is an informative, eye-opening, and brave book that offers us a voice often missing in environmental and climate change scholarship. Nakate, a young woman climate change activist based in Kampala, Uganda, begins the book by reflecting on the morning of January 2020 in Davos, Switzerland. Nakate was part of the press conference at the World Economic Forum and had taken pictures with four other young climate activists (all from Europe). At the start of the book, she reflects on finding out that she had been cropped out of a photo that was published in the media. Only a piece of her coat was left to confirm to herself that this was clearly the photo she had been in. In the photo, Vanessa was the only black woman and the only African. She begins the book by reflecting on how being cropped out felt like an entire continent had been cropped out and silenced. Vanessa Nakate uses this moment of being cropped out to bring us this book; she explains: "being cropped out of that photo changed the course of my activism and my life. It reframed my thoughts about race, gender, equity and climate change justice, and it led to the words you are now reading." (Nakate, 2021: 3).

Nakate uses being cropped out of that picture to begin a conversation on race and climate activism. She points out that the climate emergency is connected to everything

and many forms of inequality and injustice- racial, gender, and geographical. In this book, Nakate questions the silencing of voices from the global South in conversations about climate change. She reminds us that the most marginalised countries will experience the harshest results of the climate crisis and most of such countries are in Africa. These countries have fewer resources and are minor contributors to the climate change crisis. Within these communities, climate change vulnerabilities are gendered- with women and young girls as the most vulnerable due to the expectations to carry the burden of domestic duties. Nakate admits that such vulnerabilities have forced her to break the silence and tell her story.

The concept of intersectionality by Crenshaw (1990) is central to the ideas Vanessa Nakate brings forth in this book. Intersectionality, as proposed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1990), is an analytical lens through which we can see the intersecting oppressions people are subject to. Intersectionality helps us appreciate how power works together to produce varying forms of oppression on experiences that would be otherwise ignored. An important idea that Nakate presents in this book is of a climate change emergency that is an everyday struggle that harshly affects the most marginalised communities.

Vanessa Nakate demonstrates how we can all be involved in climate change activism. Her activism is simple; it is clear and makes you want to join in the struggle. It makes one realise how easy change can be enacted with a placard and by using social media advocacy to connect with other activists worldwide. Very early in the book, you learn of Vanessa Nakate's courage as she reflects on the difficulty of protesting as a young woman where protesting may be found illegal and lead to imprisonment and harassment. Nakate defies gender stereotypes that ridicule and label women as irrational and emotional when they dare raise their voices against injustices.

While Nakate calls for us to join in on the fight to change the future right now, she is not oblivious to the structural inequalities that shape the climate change crisis. She is aware of the political and economic drivers of climate injustice. She calls for systemic change, not just with this book, but with her everyday activism with many other young people, such as the Youth for Future and Fridays for Future (FFF). Nakate challenges the North-South power relations and questions the absence of voices from the global South on conversations about the climate crisis that is already affecting them. She calls for the Global North to listen to *our* reality, support *our* actions and act on them. The burden to advocate for the climate emergency should not lie with the marginalised groups without questioning structures that make them vulnerable in the first place.

This book is not just about Vanessa Nakate's experience of being cropped out, though the moment is vital for us to reflect on. It is also about climate justice and an intersectional approach to our understanding of climate change. This fresh perspective from a younger generation may inspire other young African climate activists facing a similar crisis and seeking to combat it.

The book concludes with a powerful reflection on what we can do in response to the climate crisis. After reading the first nine chapters of this book, while you may be moved and inspired by Nakate's story, like me, you may still feel powerless and insignificant to contribute to the fight for climate justice. This concluding chapter is essential because it emphasises that the call for the reorientation of the economic and political systems; does not negate the importance of individual efforts. The ten steps she provides help us reflect on what we can do to support one another in environmental activism. The following are the ten ways to stand up for what is right: Find your passion and Love; Educate Yourself; Find your people; Share and Connect; Speak out; Listen too; Be creative and take care of yourself; Be the change you want to see in the world; Think globally and intersectionally; Believe.

In reading and reflecting on this book, I position myself as a young black woman living in a part of Africa where I experience many freedoms and just as many attempts to silence me. I am inspired by Vanessa's courage to own her voice and tell her story. I am also sad that she has already had to defend her humanity at this young age and explain her existence in spaces that seek to silence black bodies. I am also aware that this book was not meant for any of the emotions I sit with; while they are important, what is more urgent is the need for greater climate justice representation among African activists. As Nakate points out, the climate crisis cannot be solved without resolving other inequalities that are embedded in the climate crisis.

## References

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