

AFRICAN CLIMATE ACTIVISM, MEDIA AND THE DENIAL OF RACISM: THE TACIT SILENCING OF VANESSA NAKATE

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Critical social studies have highlighted the varied methods by which climate activism is reproduced in discourse. This paper examines an incident in which an African youth climate activist, Vanessa Nakate, had her image cropped out of a media photograph taken at the World Economic Forum. Our analysis focuses on three media-based interactions with Vanessa, including two interviews with local (Ugandan) television stations and one interview with a South African broadcaster. Our analysis utilizes discursive psychology (DP) and conversation analysis (CA) to highlight and problematize the discursive and interactional strategies employed by speakers in these interviews. We note three discursive methods by which Vanessa's activism is challenged: a challenge to her ability to represent 'African' climate activists; an undermining of Vanessa's claim that her exclusion was racially motivated; and a discourse of emotionality as foregrounding irrationality and incompetence. These three discursive strategies serve to delegitimize Vanessa's larger claim of a racially motivated act, positioning her as a naïve subject acting alone from a point of self-interest. We discuss the implications of our findings for future research in community psychology and African climate activism.

Keywords: Africa, climate activism, denial, media, racism.

1. Introduction

The media plays a powerful role in shaping public discourse on climate activism. In this paper, we demonstrate how the media undermined a climate activist's claims of racism in a news report on climate activism. Our paper is based on media interviews with Vanessa Nakate, a climate activist from Uganda, who was cropped out of a photo with fellow white youth climate activists after a meeting at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland. We show how Vanessa's claims are undermined by the media by questioning her legitimacy to represent Africa, by questioning whether the cropping out incident was indeed racially motivated and by representing her emotionality as incompetence. We discuss the implications for African climate activists' calls for more equitable reporting of African climate change activism by drawing attention to the barriers to collective action in this regard.

Youth climate activism has received much attention through global protests such as *Fridays for the Future* and various other social media campaigns. Vanessa Nakate was part of a group of five female youth activists including Greta Thunberg, Luisa Neubauer, Isabelle Axelsson and Loukina Tille at the WEF. The activists conducted a press briefing at the WEF to draw attention to climate justice. The press briefing was reported on by the Associated Press (AP), but Vanessa was not

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mentioned in the article, and her image was removed from a published photograph of the group of youth activists. In an emotional video post following the incident, Vanessa claimed that her exclusion was racially motivated and that she had been silenced by the AP. Predictably, the AP denied the claim of racism and suggested that she had been ‘cropped out’ to improve the composition of the picture (there were buildings behind Vanessa’s image that needed to be removed).

The AP subsequently retracted the cropped photo and published the original image that included all five activists. The Executive Editor of the AP issued an apology, indicating that she realized that cropping the photo was a *mistake* that silenced Vanessa’s voice. In other words, the perceived racism was not an intentional act. The incident not only pointed towards racism in media reporting of climate activism, but also opened up potential racialized disruptions within the group of global youth climate activists that value post-racial thinking. Climate activists (read white and from the global North) quickly organized events to discuss racism and climate activism as well as Africa’s climate change plight.

The incident touched a raw nerve about racism and climate activism in the media. Vanessa, in particular, was adamant that the incident not only revealed racism against her but was symptomatic of the erasure of Africa’s voice in global climate justice activism. It laid bare what African activists have claimed for a long time: that African women not only experience the brunt of climate change but that they are discriminated against by the media in their activism. Not only did the AP deny racism (for example, Vanessa’s erasure was done for technical reasons and after the AP realized their mistake, they published the original photograph), what was particularly interesting was how the African media, who presumably would have displayed some solidarity with Vanessa, also actively undermined her claims of racism following the incident. Before proceeding, it is important to discuss the theoretical resources that framed this study.

2. Climate activism, media and the denial of racism

The racist cropping incident can be located within a rich body of work on racism in the media. Media play a powerful role in shaping public discourses about race and racism (Titley, 2019). Not only are minority issues underrepresented in the media; when they do appear they are represented in problematic ways (Simmons & LeCouteur, 2008) and with little agency or voice (van Dijk, 2000). The media also sometimes report on racist stories without problematizing how racism is represented (Dunn et al., 2011) or represent racism as an individual act rather than a systemic problem (Wasserman, 2010).

As with the cropping out incident, an important aspect of racism in the media is the *denial of racism* (van Dijk, 1992). Many studies have shown how the media draw on denial strategies when confronted with claims of racism. For example, they may deny racism through suggesting that racism was a mistake and was not intended to be racist (Hagren, 2019); that race-based thinking and ‘evil’ racism are endemic in society and the media simply report on those (Berger, 2001); and that often stories are run based on newsworthiness rather than on race (Durrheim et al., 2005). In addition, many media houses have policies that condemn racism, noting that deviation from these policies are simply personal opinion or an individual act (Due, 2011). The media also downplay claims of racism by drawing on humour (‘we were only having a bit of fun’) or, more insidiously, by suggesting that those who claim racism are themselves racist (Durrheim et al., 2005).

For van Dijk (1992), the denial of racism is inextricably linked to ‘modern’ (subtle) racism that serves to protect the media from being called out on racism but allows them to continue with problematic practices. The denial of racism also shifts the attention firmly to those who make the claims of racism to introduce and manage those claims (Rafaely, in press), which is often very difficult to do, especially in contexts where the idea of the ‘post-racial’ is strong (Berger, 2001). For example, if accusations of racism are ‘unfounded’, then there must be other reasons to explain the ‘alleged’ or ‘perceived’ racism. In many instances, the reasons are attributed to the internality of the persons making those claims (Whitehead, 2009). Previous studies have shown how the media cast doubts on the motives of activists who make claims of racism and question the sincerity of their commitment to activism. Activists are positioned as individuals who do not represent who they say they do, lack active citizenship, and who seek political fame through their claims (Barnes & Milovanovic, 2015). For example, one study of environmental activism (Barnes, 2018) demonstrated how television interviewers actively positioned environmental activists as individual, lone-wolf criminals who do not represent the communities and organizations they claim to. Any claims to racism were quickly dismissed as the interviewer discredited the intentions of the activists and who they claimed to represent.

Importantly, the denial of racism and the undermining of those who make claims serves to control resistance (van Dijk, 1992) to problematic media reporting practices. By denying racism and positioning activists as acting from individual interests with individual hang-ups, those who make claims of racism find it difficult to make credible claims as a *collective*. This is particularly true for new social movements that rely on social and political networks to develop social action. Thus, for community psychologists, it is important to identify barriers to collective action and mobilization when African activists attempt to claim equal recognition in the fight for climate justice. It is, however, equally important to identify the ways that activists resist the denial of racism.

3. Methods

In our analysis, we examine three YouTube videos that focus on the incident at Davos. Our data collection process revealed a surprising absence of interview material on which to draw. A comprehensive Internet search for interviews following the incident at Davos yielded three interviews with Vanessa, all with African broadcasters. It is perhaps analytically relevant to note the relative dearth of available interview material on this topic.

Thus, our data consist of three media-based interactions with Vanessa. The first is an interview with UrbanToday, a breakfast show on Urban TV Uganda. UrbanToday is a talk-based show that focuses on local news and entertainment. The interview was conducted on 29 January, 2020 and is approximately 19 minutes. The second interview was conducted with NBS Television, a Ugandan TV station that focuses on carrying live broadcasts of political and current events. The interview with Vanessa was held on 29 January, 2020 and is approximately 8 minutes. The final interview took place on SABC (the South African Broadcasting Corporation), South Africa’s national broadcasting agency. The interview was held on Africa Perspective, a nightly show that focuses on relevant news from the African continent. Vanessa’s interview was held on 30 January, 2020 and was a small segment of approximately 13 minutes of the larger 50-minute show.

Our analysis is based on selected extracts from these videos. The videos themselves were retrieved and downloaded from YouTube in the months after they were uploaded from their

respective sources. Data were transcribed using the Jeffersonian transcription conventions (Jefferson, 2004) and were analysed using an approach that combined conversation- and discursive-analytic methodologies (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Sacks, 1992). Specifically, by analyzing sequences of talk-in-interaction (Schegloff, 2007a), we sought to examine the rhetorical devices utilized by the speakers and the subject positions made available to speakers in these interactions.

Our analysis is grounded in the assumptions of the discursive approach, and examines the mechanisms by which race is entrenched in talk-in-interaction, in order to begin to destabilize these forms of knowledge and make space for alternative voices. This analytic approach problematizes the idea of an ‘essential’ or even ‘factual’ account of the incident, focusing instead on the methods by which language is used to produce particular ‘versions’ or ‘accounts’ of the incident, which receive varying degrees of consensus and affiliation from participants (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

Although the analysis engages with a small number of interviews, and is thus not generalizable in the typical sense, our study certainly demonstrates a range of the discursive possibilities (Peräkylä, 2004) that are available in talk about climate activism. We provide this analysis as a starting point for further studies that focus on the discursive production of climate activism and its intersection with race, nationality and other forms of potential discrimination.

We use the following transcription conventions:

- [] Square brackets mark the start and end of overlapping speech. They are aligned to mark the precise position of overlap.
- ↑↓ Vertical arrows precede marked pitch movement
- Underlining indicates emphasis
- (0.4) Numbers in round brackets measure pauses in tenths of a second
- (.) Micropause
- (()) Additional comments from the transcriber, e.g. about features of context or delivery.
- :: Colons show degrees of elongation of the prior sound
- hhh Out-breaths
- .hhh In-breaths

4. Findings and discussion

Our central claims are: (a) that Vanessa’s competence as an activist is questioned through discourses of nationality and rationality; and (b) that her claim of a racially motivated exclusion is treated as vulnerable to sanctioning and thus bolstered through a range of interactional tools. Therefore, we structure our findings around the following themes: (a) challenges to Vanessa’s commitment to a ‘truly African’ activism; (b) Vanessa’s claim that her exclusion was racially motivated, and; (c) her positioning by interviewers as an emotional and thus irrational subject.

4.1 A ‘truly African’ activism

We noted above that one method by which activism is undermined is by questioning whether activists represent who they claim to represent (Barnes, 2018). In this instance, interviewers questioned Vanessa’s credibility as an activist who is committed to Africa, tacitly asserting that only a committed *African* activist can claim to represent the continent. Thus, before Vanessa could make claims of racism on behalf of all Africans, she had to defend her claims to represent Africa in the first place. If she could not prove that she was representing Africa, she must have been representing herself. How then could the AP have been racist towards *all* Africans?

At a prior point in the interview, the interviewer asks Vanessa how many trees she has planted in Kampala as evidence of her commitment (or lack thereof) to ‘Africa’. She awkwardly suggests that she has not planted trees in Kampala but has planted many trees in the rest of the country. The fact that she is asked that question is, in itself, interesting. One would have expected sympathy, if not outrage, from African journalists at the racist cropping incident. Instead, Vanessa was required to go to great lengths to prove that she was genuine in her commitment to Uganda, and that she had a legitimate claim to representing Africa. Similarly, in the following excerpt, the interviewer challenges Vanessa’s claim to legitimacy as an African climate activist. By problematizing her fight for climate change in an international setting, the interviewer asserts that her activism is a platform for her own fame and glory rather than an honest fight for Uganda’s (and Africa’s) climate wellbeing.

Excerpt 1 [UrbanToday 12:22 – 13:14]

- 1 P2 But u:h one of your idols (.) and that’s Greta (.)
2 Thunberg you-you (.) quote her many times [: .h]
3 P1 [Mm]
4 Um:: (0.4) ↑don’t you think that you should be fighting for
5 climate change ↓he::re because you’re he:re you’ve got Lake
6 Victoria Mabira Forest
7 P1 Mm
8 P2 .hh Uh all [these places Murchison Falls all these ((unclear))]
9 P1 [we had Murchison Falls was uh under threat as well]
10 P2 issues uh are yo::u (.) thinking about that as opposed to
11 fighting fo:r Uganda’s climate change but abroad
12 VN .hh U:h actually I’ve ↑been fighting for Uganda’s climate
13 change fo:r (.) for fifty six no::w it’s tha- just that
14 Ugandans (.) don’t give a damn

15 P1 O:::h they they they they don't care
16 P2 [they don't give it a listening ear]
17 VN [They don't care because if your] (.) if you::'re to look at–
18 un↑fortunately my first Twitter account it was (0.2) .hh I ca-
19 I somehow ↑lost [it?] so I had to create another one
20 P1 [Mm]
21 .hh but if you were to look through the history of what I've
22 been doin:g .h
23 P1 Mm
24 VN Then you'll understand that (.) I really came from scratch .hh
25 and I've ↑been doing all I can
26 P1 For [Uganda]
27 VN [And ma]inly for Uganda
28 P1 Mm::
29 VN It's just that I get the opportunity to be invi:ted but (0.3) I
30 mean (.) there are chances of me staying there but I still come
31 back [so]
32 P1 [Al]↑right

The interviewer begins by asking a very explicit question ('don't you think that you should be fighting for climate change here'), in other words in Uganda, Africa, with the warrant for this question being 'because you are here'. He thus immediately situates her as a specifically African activist whose relevant work should therefore be done in Africa rather than anywhere else. After listing three areas specific to Uganda that are under environmental threat (lines 5-8), he asks again whether Vanessa has considered this 'as opposed to fighting... but abroad'. What is at stake is the suggestion that for an African activist's claim to represent Africa to be treated as legitimate, they have to have first demonstrated their credibility and competence in an African setting. Furthermore, the interviewer's question draws on discourses of Africa as neglected on the global climate stage (Sealey-Huggins, 2018), suggesting that these African landmarks are not being treated as important *because* of their 'African'-ness. Thus, his tacit suggestion is that her attendance at such global conferences is part of the *problem* that maintains these larger ideological biases toward Africa, thereby positioning her as not only engaging in activism for the wrong reasons, but also worsening Africa's plight by 'doing activism' in a manner aligned with the global North. Thus, the question 'Don't you think that you should be fighting for climate change *here*?' problematizes the very relevance of a global activism in an African context, producing a discursive polarity that positions 'truly African' activists as 'fighting... here... rather than abroad'.

Vanessa dismantles this polarizing question by providing evidence of a long-term commitment to activism on home ground (lines 12-13). This evidence neutralizes his assertion that she does not do activist work ‘here’, i.e. in Uganda, and thus his critique of her lack of commitment to African activism. She then suggests that the reason for the lack of strong climate-relevant interventions in Uganda is not due to an absence of activism on her part, but rather to the fact that ‘Ugandans don’t give a damn’. In other words, if there are climate challenges in Uganda they are certainly not due to the fact that she is fighting her battle on the wrong ground. This answer both confirms her commitment, and affirms that the fault (or lack of focus on African activism) lies with others. This evaluation of Ugandans’ attitudes toward climate change is significant because it dismantles the cause-and-effect relationship between her activism and real climate improvements in the country, with Vanessa repositioning herself here (and in the remainder of this excerpt) as a dedicated activist who can, nevertheless, only do so much.

Vanessa continues by providing even further evidence of her long-term commitment to activism at home. She suggests that a history of her Twitter account would demonstrate that she started from nothing, and has been doing everything she can for her country (lines 17-27). By resisting the interviewer’s interpretation of her efforts, Vanessa repositions herself as an activist who, despite her gruelling yet unrewarded efforts, has travelled internationally on behalf of her country (rather than as a disingenuous individual using Uganda as an excuse to acquire personal fame). Vanessa concludes by providing one final, and powerful, piece of evidence for her commitment: she notes that she was ‘invited’ to the conference at Davos, and that despite the possibility of staying there (moving abroad), she continues to ‘still come back’, proving her dedication to Uganda and the fact that she her activism is truly African. Over the course of this interaction, Vanessa refuses to accept the undermining of her commitment and consistently strengthens her position by providing evidence that refutes her interlocutor’s implicit and explicit doubts about her dedication to an African-based activism.

4.2 *The onus on Vanessa to ‘prove’ racism*

Vanessa’s central claim is that her exclusion was a form of ‘silencing’ on the part of Western media, which is itself part of a larger pattern of erasure of African experiences. To accomplish this, much of her rhetorical strategy hinges on ‘generalization’ (Scheibman, 2007), or claiming a correspondence between general African experiences of marginalization and this specific incident of exclusion (see Rafaely, in press). Generalization functions to bolster the robustness of the claim by providing a warrant that is grounded in the external world (i.e. ‘this is something that happens’) (Edwards & Potter, 1992). However, as we show in later extracts (cf. Excerpt 4) she is met (by African media) with multiple forms of resistance to this interpretation; these resistances are accomplished by consistently ‘individualizing’ the experience that she has produced as ‘generalized’.

Excerpt 2 [Africa Perspective 5:09 – 5:21]

- 1 VN: I was thinking of the people back at home an::d uh .hh the
- 2 different climate activists from Africa .hh and how they are
- 3 struggling so hard to get listened to .hh and yet um media
- 4 keeps cropping them out

Vanessa begins by referring to ‘the people back at home’ and makes relevant her potential membership in three categories: ‘the people back at home’, ‘climate activists’, and ‘Africa’. By tying her claim of discrimination to her membership in these categories, Vanessa establishes the incident as a racially motivated one by describing it as something that happens routinely to others in these particular membership categories: ‘media *keeps cropping them out*’. The use of the category ‘Africa’ also works to implicitly mobilize a range of common-sense knowledge about the category (Schegloff, 2007b), such as its status as a part of the global South and thus under-resourced, impoverished and subject to many climate injustices perpetrated by the global North (Baarsch et al., 2020; Tumushabe, 2018).

In order to manage the delicate accountability of a racism claim (Whitehead, in press), Vanessa thus uses her membership in a racial category as a resource for the production of this action (Whitehead, 2009). Furthermore, by respecifying this incident as an instance of a larger type of occurrences, Vanessa demonstrates that this is more than a singular case and thereby increases the verifiability of her claim (Edwards & Potter, 1992). As further evidence of Vanessa’s resistance to various forms of discursive undermining, she reclaims the words ‘cropped out’ and uses them to highlight a general experience of African silencing and erasure. Nevertheless, Vanessa’s claim of ‘silencing’ is directly challenged in the following interview. We note that the interviewer provides an ‘individualized’ interpretation for the incident, suggesting that her exclusion was a direct result of her failings as an activist, rather than of her racial category.

Excerpt 3 [NBS Uganda 1:50 – 2:47]

- 1 P2 W- ↑Why is your message so important to you=why. should have
2 your message been. in that article
- 3 VN .hh It is impo:rtant becau:se um: .h it’s a message that
4 carries a different ↑story people from Africa are suffering .hh
5 as a result of the climate ↑crisis and we’ve not had African
6 voices .hh fully represented on the world stage .h so it was
7 ↑really hu:rting to see that ↑I had been cropped out because it
8 was a form of silencing me
- 9 P2 Mm .hh you had. earlier on been silenced even by the Ugandan
10 media=you told me you have been protesting for about fifty six
11 weeks .h in front of Parliament [.hh] hardly ↑anyone else
- 12 VN [Ya]
13 covered you
- 14 VN .hh ya um:: ya um I’ve ↑been covered by some=u::h [.hhh]
- 15 P2 [Mm]

16 I had an interview with Urban .hh u::m News u::h Observer
17 wrote about me .hh and u::h NBS as well first off: I had u:h an
18 interview with them .hh but it was a:: one off ↑interview u::m
19 it's not ↑something that .hh the Ugandan media reports u::h
20 like all the time
21 P2 Mm
22 cos it's so political .hh ya

The interviewer begins by framing Vanessa's message about climate change as something that is important to her (line 1), treating it as a personal concern rather than as a global (and publicly concerning) crisis. In doing so, the interviewer positions Vanessa as having a personal stake in the visibility of her message rather than treating its focus as benefiting *others*. Furthermore, by asking 'why should have [her message] been included' in the report, the interviewer immediately problematizes the basis of her claim, which relies on the (unexplicated) assumption that *all* the participants' messages should have been reported in the article, and that any form of exclusion was thus accountable. In producing his initial question this way, the interviewer accomplishes two things: firstly, he treats her message as being important *to her* rather than relevant to the larger population or fellow activists; secondly, by asking her what about her message was so important that it belonged in the media, he does not treat its absence as immediately accountable. These two strategies focus on the content of Vanessa's message (its importance and relevance) in 'earning' it a place in the media report; and in doing so resist Vanessa's interpretation that her exclusion was accountable and part of a larger pattern of African marginalization. In the remainder of the excerpt, the interviewer consistently supports his discursive position (that Vanessa's exclusion is based on her unconvincing message) by pointing to Vanessa's general exclusion from even local media (lines 9-13). His critique suggests that despite her lengthy and committed protest outside Parliament, 'hardly anyone' had covered her. This directly challenges Vanessa's narrative of African-based exclusion, by noting her 'silencing' in Ugandan media and the fact that 'they hardly covered you'. Both claims tacitly assert that if indeed her lack of presence in the media were racially motivated, as she is claiming, then it would be only international media excluding her, and indeed the non-reporting would potentially be accounted for as a form of racial 'silencing'. However, since the majority of Ugandan media ignore her activist work too, and she is excluded ('silenced') from local media as well (with the assumption that local media would not discriminate racially), then her exclusion can only be due to her own failings to make herself adequately visible; and thus provides an alternate interpretation: that her exclusion has its basis in an individual lack of competence, rather than a general pattern of African silencing.

Vanessa's response centres the African narrative, mobilizing normative knowledge about Africa's larger exclusion from international media. In so doing she generalizes the incident, demonstrating that it is one instance of a pattern of marginalization of African voices, an assertion which then bolsters her claim of racism by demonstrating that it was not the *value* of her message, but rather its *source*, that led to its exclusion. Thus, throughout the interview, Vanessa observably resists the interviewer's framing of the incident by consistently providing evidence of her own to undermine his claims and support her interpretation. She begins by providing a detailed list of the

media that have, in fact, ‘covered’ her (lines 14-18). She continues by noting that failure to report activism in Uganda is common, on the grounds that it is ‘too political’ (lines 19-20). She thus resists his interpretation by providing evidence that invalidates his version by demonstrating the flaws in his argument. Although the interviewer proposes an account that hinges on her incompetence as an activist, Vanessa’s evidence-based account challenges his interpretation. This significant work on her part demonstrates the possibilities of resistance that are available to female African activists even in the face of tacit (or explicit) undermining of their ability and commitment.

Below, we analyse the intersection of a number of the methods that have been analysed thus far during the interviews with Vanessa.

Excerpt 4 [UrbanToday 17:06 – 17:42]

- 1 P2: Do ↑you feel it wa::s (.) so much to do with u::h (.) the
2 work (.) that they felt that your work wasn’t .hh (.) good
3 enough .h or do you think it was just a thing of
4 [.hh of u::h racism or you actually] ↑think it was a thing to
5 P1: [Racism? Like you say in your tw]eet
6 P2 do with u::h feminism?
7 VN: I think it was a thing to do with (1.6) ↓everything
8 P1: Oka[y? Including ↑racism? Because you mentioned it in your
9 tweet as well?]
10 VN: [Ya because everything: ya of course] (.) including
11 th[a:t:]
12 P1: [Mm]
13 VN: And uh .hh (.) getting to know that they did that to hh I think
14 the president of South Africa sometime back actually last year
15 .hhh uh it makes me realize that (0.2) maybe it’s their thing
16 and they have an issue with black [people]
17 P1: [With b]lack peop[l:e]
18 VN: [Ya]
19 P1: ↑All right

In the excerpt Vanessa is provided with a list of possible (intentional) reasons for her exclusion from the article (lines 1-6). The possible accounts include a number of the interpretations of this incident that have been explored during this analysis. The interviewer’s first possible account is ‘individualised’ and based on her competence as an activist. His second possible account refers to

her inclusion in the ‘Africa’ category and suggests that the incident was racially motivated. The first interviewer simultaneously provides the ‘racism’ account but substantiates it by formulating it as *her* account rather than his (lines 8-9), demonstrating the potential sanctionability involved in making this explicitly racialized claim (Whitehead, 2009). Finally, the second interviewer asks if perhaps the exclusion was to do with ‘feminism’, another account that is tied to a membership category, in this case ‘gender’ rather than ‘race’. The fact that ‘feminism’ is a weak or insubstantial account (because *all* the activists in her group were females) provides explicit evidence that the interviewer orients to her gender as potentially relevant, and that it is treated *by him* as a potential account for her exclusion.

Vanessa responds to this list of possible explanations by avoiding making an explicit claim that the incident was racially motivated, again orienting to the sanctionability of such a claim (Whitehead, 2009). When the interviewer pursues this potential account by asking explicitly if Vanessa thinks the incident was race-based she responds by saying ‘of course including that’, a mitigated response that displays the vulnerability to disciplining of an overt racial claim. Vanessa therefore bolsters this (albeit mitigated) claim by providing an additional powerful account for such a racialized reading of the occurrence. She notes that ‘they did that’ to the ‘President of South Africa’ as well (lines 13-14). A common-sense analysis of the parallel she draws between her story and this one suggests that she is a member of the same racial category as the President. In referring to the President of South Africa, and demonstrating that he had received similar treatment, Vanessa makes explicit that the basis for this absence of her identification in the report is unequivocally her membership in the ‘black’ racial category. In addition, by providing evidence of a similar incident occurring to a person occupying a far higher status category than herself, Vanessa demonstrably is left with no choice but to interpret the incident in racialized terms. Significantly, by noting that the black person receiving the treatment could be a youth activist or head of state, Vanessa demonstrates that regardless of the individual characteristics of the person (Pomerantz, 1986), what is at stake is their membership in the racial category being invoked. Thus, the occurrence is attributed to race rather than to any other possible characteristic. This conclusion is simultaneously produced by Vanessa and the interviewer, suggesting his strong affiliation with her conclusion and demonstrating its veracity in light of the strong evidence she has produced. This affiliation is a notable accomplishment and demonstrates yet again the interactional nuances of resistance by which Vanessa reclaims her status as a legitimate activist.

4.3 *Emotion as irrationality*

Apart from the challenges to the veracity of her commitment and contribution to climate change in Africa, Vanessa is also tacitly positioned as an emotionally volatile subject in the interviews. Research on emotion in interaction (Edwards, 1999; Peräkylä & Sorjonen, 2012) suggests that emotion is defined ‘in contrast to cognition and rational thought’ (Edwards, 1999, p. 273). Thus, displays of emotion provide a warrant for treating their producer as ‘irrational and subjective’, and, in this instance, as potentially using a speaker’s irrationality as the basis for foregrounding their lack of competence in a particular activity. In the present section, we examine two interactions: the first in which Vanessa’s emotion is challenged as being irrational and self-serving; and the second in which Vanessa resists this interpretation of her emotionality by demonstrating the ‘rational accountability’ (Edwards, 1999, p. 282) of her emotions and their appropriateness in this particular situation.

In the Twitter video (YouTube, 2020) that she posted in order to challenge her exclusion at the press briefing, Vanessa was demonstrably emotional, at some points crying and being unable to speak. Both of the extracts below refer to the emotionality displayed by Vanessa during her Twitter video. It is important to note that these extracts are from interviews conducted by African males and that significant work is done to extract emotional responses from Vanessa and use them as the basis for highlighting her potential incompetence as an irrational subject. In other words, not only is Vanessa's emotional response explicitly sought out, but it is also challenged. Vanessa orients to these normative assumptions about emotionality as counterposed against rationality by using mitigated emotion words (Edwards, 1999) and attributing her emotional responses to a larger set of concerns about African activism. She thus seeks to continually reposition herself as a competent activist whose emotional response is warranted in light of the injury suffered by the AP. Furthermore, by consistently tying this injustice to the experience of a larger category of persons (Africans in general), Vanessa provides a stronger warrant for her emotionality to be seen as legitimate and not as disqualifying her from competent activism.

In the following extract, a television presenter introduces an upcoming interview with Vanessa. In his introduction, the presenter refers to, and challenges, her emotional response to the incident, implying that her emotion is disproportionate to the occurrence on which it is based and thus demonstrates a lack of rationality on her part.

Excerpt 5 [NBS Uganda 0:44 – 1:02]

- 1 P1 ↑Raymond Mujuni is catching up. with: ah Vanessa Nakate on (.)
- 2 what she thinks about this experience and definitely ju-Mujuni
- 3 will be giving us: that update ↑but (.) Mujuni I want to ask
- 4 you (.) ↑why should Vanessa (.) cry over this she can con↑tinue
- 5 being in activism

The presenter's rhetorical question in line 4 foregrounds and simultaneously problematizes Vanessa's emotional response to the incident. The candidate 'answer' ('she can continue being in activism') suggests that 'crying', or emotion, would be relevant only if Vanessa had somehow been prohibited from further activism work. In other words, if activism and climate change are her true goal, then this exclusion should not affect her because it has no 'real' consequence. The presenter thus produces Vanessa's response as irrational, relying on normative discourses about emotionality as counterposed to rationality to account for his claim. This positioning of Vanessa's emotional response situates Vanessa as an irrational and emotionally volatile subject, which implicitly challenges her very competence as a rational activist.

In the interview below, two interviewers introduce the topic of Vanessa's emotional response to the incident at Davos. Vanessa asserts that she felt the need to contain her emotionality before engaging with the media platform. Despite her orientation to emotion as a negative addition to engagement with the media, ultimately Vanessa did display her emotional response while she was making the video. However, she provides an alternative, positive reading of her emotional response as evidence of her sincerity; thereby reclaiming a potentially negative interpretation of herself as 'hysterical' into a more positive interpretation of herself as 'sincere and heartfelt'. This discursive strategy demonstrates that under certain conditions, emotion is seen as appropriate and

therefore not implying a lack of rationality (Edwards, 1999); it also demonstrates the resources by which Vanessa recruits her emotional response to strengthen her position as a competent and rational activist.

Excerpt 6 [UrbanToday 10:16 – 10:46]

- 1 VN: No uh-uh I was just scared of a::h (.) breaking ↓do::↑wn like
2 in front of: u:h the vide[o::] and people are watching .hh
3 P1: [Mm:]
4 and so I decided to do it ↑la:ter when I was feeling much
5 [calmer but (0.2)]
6 P1: [Much better mm:]
7 But (.) unfortunately I still .hh
8 P1: Broke do[wn mm]
9 VN: [Broke d]own .hh ya so um (0.6) it was ↑just a: (.) a
10 try:ing (.) a trying moment for me [.hh a]nd u:h (1.0) in the
11 P1: [Okay]
12 video I clearly explained what it: felt because I didn't write
13 down (.) what I sai:[d .hh] it was (.) it was: it came from
14 P1: [Mm mm]
15 VN: the heart yes:: ya

Vanessa notes that, when she eventually made the video, she still ‘broke down’ despite her efforts to remain unemotional. The words ‘broke down’ suggest some damage to an existing structure, denoting a negative and perhaps uncontrolled element to her emotional response (Edwards, 1999). Vanessa’s assessment of this breakdown as ‘unfortunate’ suggests a further orientation to an emotional response being less preferable than a non-emotional response. However, she ultimately reclaims her emotion by providing an alternative reading: she suggests that the video she made ‘came from the heart’, i.e. that it was spontaneous and not based on a particular agenda. Vanessa demonstrates her normative orientation to emotion as a potentially delegitimizing component of her response. Furthermore, by converting her emotion into a positive and appropriate reaction, she engages in explicit ‘emotion work’ (Frith & Kitzinger, 1998) and thereby respecifies it as evidence of her sincerity. Ultimately, Vanessa resists the interpretation of her emotional response as implicating her competence by reframing it as a demonstration of her sincerity, rather than as an indication of potential weakness. Here again, she demonstrates the discursive possibilities of reclaiming power and contesting the subject positions that are ascribed to her.

5. Concluding remarks

The starting point of this paper was the claim of racism made by Vanessa Nakate in response to her exclusion from a media report and photograph by the AP. The AP denied the intentionality of the act and the implication that it points to a larger systemic problem in media reporting practices. However, what was particularly interesting is that the African media themselves continued to question whether the cropping out incident was indeed racist, thereby continuing and enabling the denial of racism by the media. We show how African women activists are challenged to prove their commitment to representing Africa in their climate efforts. In addition, claims of racism are subjected to extra scrutiny, and considerable effort is required in order to demonstrate their legitimacy. Women activists have to prove their worth as more than naïve, emotional and attention-seeking, since emotion is normatively associated with irrationality, which is seen as weakening climate activists' competence.

This said, our analysis has shown that although these forms of undermining are perhaps prevalent in talk about climate activism, speakers have the recourse to contest and resist these subversions in order to demonstrate their legitimacy and reclaim their power. Thus, a crucial finding from our analysis is that despite the multiple and varied discursive strategies employed by various speakers to delegitimize her activism project, Vanessa is demonstrably able to mobilize alternative narratives of her own in order to resist and transform the discourses being presented to (and about) her. In every instance where her activism is undermined – either in terms of her commitment to Africa, her competence as an activist or her emotional irrationality – Vanessa provides evidence-based counter-arguments to destabilize her interlocutors' arguments. This exciting finding demonstrates the possibilities of resistance to the tired critiques levelled against activists. It also provides some key initial findings about how discourse can be used as a tacit form of oppression in media talk about climate activism, but more importantly how discourse can be used in turn to dismantle the very forms of oppression that it creates.

In conclusion, we note that African activism is contested on multiple levels, and that efforts to destabilize these tacit forms of oppression must encourage and foreground alternative discursive possibilities, specifically on public platforms. The media can be important allies in promoting climate activism. They are important in terms of how African women climate activists are represented not only in their activism but also how they are represented in the face of unfair treatment. A critical study of activism thus requires attention to the subversive ways that activism is undermined by the media and a concomitant effort to ensuring that the 'silencing' and marginalizing of African females is challenged and made publicly accountable. It is important for community psychologists and other climate allies to promote conditions where activists can do their work without having to prove themselves as committed, strong and competent. In addition, activists should be in a position to make claims of racism without their claims being undermined and questioned.

Importantly, interventions that place special emphasis on African climate activism (as was the response after the Davos incident) should not reinforce the familiar trope that Africa and its activists are in need of special intervention that can only be facilitated by the global North. Vanessa's refusal to be silenced and her challenge to an international media platform are proof that Africa has powerful activists of her own. With the support of communities, local media platforms and grassroots movements, African activists can create meaningful change on a global level. We hope that this paper will stimulate more work on climate activism, media and racism.

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