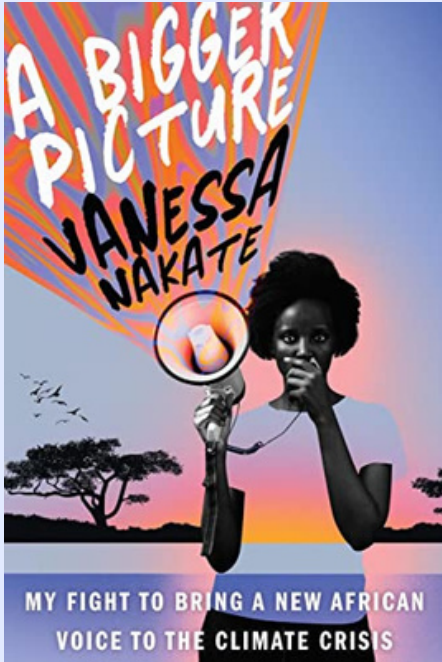


A Bigger Picture



A Bigger Picture: My Fight to Bring a New African Voice to the Climate Crisis,
Vanessa Nakate,
Mariner Books, 2022,
240 pages



From a shy student in Kampala to one of the world's leading climate justice advocates, Vanessa Nakate's powerful and thought-provoking memoir *A Bigger Picture: My Fight to Bring a New African Voice to the Climate Crisis*, shares her personal evolution as a leader and voice for her continent. Nakate addresses cultural barriers for young Ugandan women, political threats for advocates, the inequities present in the climate justice movement, and the disproportionate burden Africa bears in climate change.

In 2020, Nakate attended the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, as one of five young international delegates. She was famously cropped out of an AP photograph; the remaining advocates were white. The incident highlighted one of Nakate's core messages--that those who have been omitted from climate discussions must be heard.

Nakate provides resources for readers: the "17 Sustainable Development Goals" developed by her United Nations 2020 youth leadership cohort, the chapter titled "What Can I Do?," and an extensive appendix of organizations and contacts.

Interview with a Reader: Joyce Orishaba

A Bigger Picture addresses ecosystem destruction, including disruption in the Congo Basin Rainforest Ecosystem, which has been home to as many as 150 ethnic groups for as long as 50,000 years. One of these, the Batwa, were--as a consequence of fortress conservation efforts to save endangered mountain gorillas--displaced in the 1990s and forced off their ancestral land to create Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. We asked Joyce Orishaba, a 17-year-old high school student in California and member of the Batwa tribe to comment on Vanessa Nakate's *A Bigger Picture: My Fight to Bring a New African Voice to the Climate Crisis*. Last year, Joyce was one of 13 winners (of more than 12,000 entries) in the New York Times' 100 Words Personal Narrative Contest, with her essay, "A River Runs Through Me." Her winning essay:



"I am six years old, sleeping with nothing but a banana leaf over my shoulders to keep me warm. Tears fall as I see the fear and uncertainty in my aunt's eyes. She is 13. She is my mom now, and we are lost. The indigenous Batwa lost our home, the rainforest, to the mountain gorillas. We are forgotten while the gorillas are celebrated. Lost to save the species. As the sun rises the next day, I run to Munyaga River and watch it become stronger and stronger. I will be the river for my people. I am the future."

--Joyce Orishaba, 17

Joyce, what were your general impressions of the book, and of Vanessa's experience as a young climate advocate? What parts of the book were most meaningful to you?

A Bigger Picture was an amazing book about climate change told with great depth of knowledge and personal experience, and I learned a lot from it. I really enjoyed the theme of her being cropped out of the picture as a clear example of the subtle and not so subtle ways racism occurs. I think writing around that discriminatory narrative was a good way to get people into the story. I listened to the audio version of the book and I felt I could really resonate with her. More voices from the global south, and more indigenous voices, need to be heard and I'm glad she is able to spread the message on a broader scale through this book.

What would you like readers to know about the effect of the removal of Batwa from the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park to save the mountain gorillas? How has this move affected your friends, family, and culture?

My people, the indigenous Batwa, were forcibly removed from Bwindi Impenetrable forest in Uganda in the 1990s to turn it into a national park in order to save the mountain gorillas and bring tourism. But in the process of conservation, my people nearly went extinct. While efforts to save the gorillas were successful, the Batwa were left without homes, livelihoods, and access to our ancestral land. This affected my people deeply, and still does. They lost the home which had provided them with food, medicine, protection, and tranquility. Most of the children in the 1990s died before they could get a glimpse into the world, and my people's life expectancy was 28 years old compared to the Ugandan average (at the time) of 60 years. They lived hanging by a thread hoping to survive another day, which led to alcoholism and abuse. It's hard for people to care about conservation when they are dying, uneducated, and struggling to literally survive day to day. Yet my people could be a powerful voice for climate if they were given educational opportunities and reforestation can not only help us in our villages, but simultaneously combat climate change. Outside the national park, there are almost no native forests in my district anymore. We can change this.



Joyce Orishaba, right,
with her Aunt Loyce
in Uganda in 2016.
(Wendee Nicole)

If I could tell Vanessa and other young climate activists anything, I would urge them to continue highlighting the human rights violations that occurred during the Batwa's removal from the rainforest and the ongoing impacts of their displacement. More human rights violations will surely occur in the future as the poorest of the poor suffer the most from climate disasters while contributing the least.

During the displacement of my people, they were left with no choice but to beg or to participate in agriculture, which can lead to deforestation and destruction of natural habitats. My mom's nonprofit, Redemption Song Foundation (RSF), is returning the forest to the Batwa by planting up to 10,000 trees in my family's village. We have already planted more than 2,000 native and fruit trees. As Vanessa says, even the simple act of planting one tree can make a difference in the fight against climate change. I would like to ask world leaders, from Uganda to the U.S., how can conservation efforts be balanced with the protection of indigenous peoples' rights and culture?

Vanessa's discussion of the AP photo-cropping incident spark questions like: What can be done to make African voices—and those from other underrepresented cultures—more visible in climate conversations? And more respected in those conversations, so they aren't marginalized?

One way to make African voices and other underrepresented cultures more visible in climate conversations is to actively seek out and lift up their perspectives and experiences. This could be funding more diverse speakers and experts at climate events and discussions, amplifying the voices of local communities who are directly impacted by climate change, and prioritizing efforts to address environmental injustices and iniquities that disproportionately affect marginalized groups. Also, giving African and indigenous people and youth more opportunities and better education, including funds to allow Black indigenous peoples to get scholarships to study in the U.S. or abroad, training them how to be leaders in their home countries and on the world stage. African governments should allow climate activists to protest and raise awareness of the issues that will directly affect them without fear of being arrested. African voices are less heard and respected in the global world and climate activism is no different. Africans want to make a difference in the world, too, and help our families, countries, and communities. As Vanessa mentioned, "They did not just crop out a picture, they cropped the whole continent of Africa."



Uganda's Muyaga River

Out of more than 12,000 entries, your essay was one of 13 winners in the New York Times Essay contest for high school students. Has winning the contest, and having your story gain more exposure changed your perspective in any way?

Winning this contest allowed me to be invited onto local area TV stations and to be interviewed for newspapers. It is something I am so proud of. As my story gets more coverage, I feel as if my people will truly get the attention they deserve and hopefully be compensated for being removed from their land. Many Batwa are talented and smart but are simply not given opportunities to attend the best schools and receive mentorship and training. Based on my personal experience, that can make a huge difference in tapping into the unlocked potential inside each of my people. I went from being an 8-year-old failing every one of my classes and considered "stupid" in my community—which nearly led to me being 'trained' for early marriage—to someone in National Honor Society and winning a New York Times writing competition.

You're creating a new ambassador program for American and Batwa youth, called "Discover the Lost Tribe" as a part of the Redemption Song Foundation. What would you like readers to know about this program?

Discover the Lost Tribe is going to be an ambassadorship program connecting American and Batwa youth. American high school and college age youth will apply to be accepted into this competitive program and will then volunteer virtually in different program areas for 3 or 6 months before having an opportunity to travel to Uganda for a few weeks to spend time with the Batwa. My goal is to open the eyes of both American and Batwa youth about similarities and differences in their worldviews and life experiences and learn from one another.