The Other Greta Effect (OGE): Recognizing Youth Climate Activists Beyond Thunberg

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Abstract

Since Greta Thunberg's rise to international prominence as a youth climate activist, other youth activists have been identified in mass media as the 'Greta Thunberg' of their respective nations or regions. Through an analysis informed by decolonial approaches to global media studies and climate change and scholarship on climate justice, this article finds that this discursive phenomenon, termed the 'Other Great Effect' (OGE), constructs Greta Thunberg as a global icon whose identity and approach establish a normative framework for youth climate activism. The OGE supports a universalizing narrative that legitimates the global North as leaders on climate change policy and downplays the different contexts, experiences, and identities represented within youth activism. Through case studies of four young activists who have been subjected to the Other Greta Effect, we find that the OGE paradoxically contributes to these activists' illegibility while also providing opportunities to call for a more diverse climate movement. Finally, we present the Global Youth Activists Map as an alternative visualization that advances a more intersectional approach to climate justice.

KEYWORDS: youth climate activism, media studies, climate justice, decolonial studies

Introduction

Imagine going to a sacred water ceremony with your family and being unable to interact with the body of water you have visited because of its toxic levels. Imagine being called an "instigator" by a politician in power for peacefully protesting for your future. Imagine being the only Black African woman among a group of White climate activists at an important summit and having your image cropped out of a group photograph. Imagine living in a country where climate devastation was so unbearable that it forced you and your family to migrate to a new country. Imagine organizing a strike in front of governmental institutions, founding your own climate movement organization and addressing millions of people in a crowd—only to be referred to as "the Greta Thunberg" of your community. These are not hypothetical situations, but rather the realities faced by Autumn Peltier, Anuna De Wever, Vanessa Nakate, and Xiye Bastida, respectively (Hanson 2019; Campbell 2020; Hernández 2019; Forbes Staff 2021). Their identities and experiences as young climate activists have been diminished by a label that associates their hard work with another activist—a White, European girl.

Greta Thunberg has played a crucial role in mobilizing masses to take climate action in recent years. Her vulnerable and relatable rhetoric connected with audiences, framing climate change as a moral issue centered on adults' responsibility to protect children. Scholars have termed her impact the 'Greta Thunberg Effect' (Sabherwal et al. 2020)—a phenomenon whereby "familiarity with Greta Thunberg is related to individuals' greater sense of collective efficacy … and, may in turn motivate them to take collective actions to reduce global warming" (Sabherwal et al. 2020, 329). Subsequent research has confirmed Thunberg's influence and investigated its mechanisms and impacts (Han & Ahn 2020; Haugseth & Smeplass 2023; Jung et al. 2020; Nisbett & Spaiser 2022; Prakoso et al. 2021; Salerno 2023; Spaiser et al. 2022; Wahlström & Uba 2023).

The tremendous amount of media attention Greta Thunberg received transformed her into what Ghosh refers to as a 'global icon' (2011). Global icons can be widely circulated commercial symbols, such as the Coca-Cola logo, but when they take the form of a 'bio-icon,' they are people whose image not only serves as the symbol of a particular social cause, but also participates in narratives about globalization (2011, 11–12). While Ghosh analyzes icons who have had an enduring impact, such as Mother Theresa, Thunberg's notoriety has arguably been more fleeting; however, at the height of her fame, she became the symbol of youth climate activism. Although bio-icons can reinforce dominant ideologies, Ghosh notes, "on occasion, a bio-icon might serve as a placeholder for anti-hegemonic aspirations: Iconic activists such as Wangari Maathai or Ken Saro-Wiwa, for instance, facilitate the placing of ecological demands" (23). Thunberg's demand that world leaders prioritize a livable environment for children over economic growth channeled the "anti-hegemonic aspirations" of many. Her iconic status was reinforced by what we refer to as the 'Other Greta Effect' (OGE)—a media phenomenon in which like-minded young activists are labeled the 'Greta Thunberg' of another place, usually their country or region of origin.

Although we argue that this label has been harmful in some respects, we do not deny the importance of the recognition it has afforded other young climate activists. During the period when Thunberg captured the most media attention—from her first addresses to international audiences in late 2018 until the COVID-19 pandemic prevented mass gatherings in spring 2020—her iconic status garnered attention for many other youth activists who gained access to larger audiences in both mainstream media outlets and on social media. The four young activists whose stories we highlight have articulated several beneficial aspects of being associated with Thunberg. However, several of them also identify downsides to being represented as 'other Gretas.' Especially when applied to activists from outside the global North—or from Indigenous and/or racialized communities within it—the OGE participates in a discourse that is both hierarchical and homogenizing: By foregrounding Thunberg, it reinforces a narrative that the global North is best suited to take the lead in addressing

climate change, and by framing other activists as children *like Greta*, it situates them within a universal human rights framework that disregards their local and particular interests (Mies and Shiva 2014, 9–12). Both tendencies run counter to a climate justice framing, which emphasizes the interrelationships between ecological destruction and forms of social and economic injustice, and insists that solutions to ecological problems must be "sensitive to relations of unequal global geometries of power and how these intersect with relations of class, race, gender, generation, indigenous rights and socio-nature" (Chatterton 2013, 606).

An irony of the OGE is that many youth activists are themselves are well-versed in climate justice and emphasize this framework in their own rhetoric, Thunberg included. As such, we do not wish to imply that Thunberg is personally responsible for diminishing other youth activists; in fact, she and other activists from the global North have sought to amplify their voices. Instead, we argue that the OGE is paradoxical because activists who are compared to Thunberg gain beneficial recognition while also experiencing a lack of attention to their distinctive identities, inspirations, and contributions to global climate activism. As Madhanagopal et al. argue, it is the distinct experiences and knowledge of people from the global South that make their contributions to climate change research and policy so important (2022, 4). Yet it is important to recognize that the OGE does not deprive these young activists of agency; rather, being labeled a 'Greta' can provide opportunities to engage critically with climate change discourse.

Our approach to analyzing the OGE responds to the aim of this special issue to find inspiration in the etymology of the word 'crisis' in the Greek "'*krisis*' meaning 'decision'" (Warren & Clayton 2020, 1). Although labeling youth activists 'Gretas' may seem like a trivial media ploy meant to generate clicks, the OGE conveys powerful assumptions about who should lead and whose voices ought to be heard when social, economic, and political decisions about climate change are being made. Our study also contributes to a body of research that examines notions of age, ability, gender, and race in media discourse about Greta Thunberg and her position in youth climate activism (Bergmann & Ossewaarde 2020; Conrad 2021; Lakind 2020; Locke 2023; McFaddon 2020; Taft 2020; Vowles & Hultman 2022; White 2022). We first define the 'Other Greta Effect' and analyze its relationship to discourses of globalization that emphasize the leadership of the global North and downplay the structural causes of climate change, despite Thunberg's own emphasis on climate justice. We then examine four case studies of activists labeled 'Gretas' to understand how they experience and respond to the OGE: Autumn Peltier and Anuna De Wever demonstrate the polyphonic nature of activists' personal narratives and the importance of recognizing the particular collectives they represent. Vanessa Nakate and Xiye Bastida defy illegibility by contesting the 'Greta' label and advocating for more diversity in youth climate activism. Finally, we present the Global Youth Activists Map as an alternative visualization that can provide tools for a more "ecologically informed intersectional analys[is]" of youth activists' motivations and messages (Tuana 2019, 3).

Methodology

This article is part of the project "Responses to Greta Thunberg in International Media." Developed in 2019 by a group of undergraduate researchers under the leadership of Coughlin, the project website provides an introduction to Greta Thunberg and youth climate activism intended to serve a young audience. It also houses a publicly available database of news and opinion journalism written in response to Thunberg's activism. A central goal of the project is to compare responses to Thunberg's rhetoric and activism across languages and cultural contexts. This article draws on news and opinion articles from the database that were published in different international media outlets and languages, primarily English and Spanish. Other primary sources include books, speeches, interviews, and social media posts by Thunberg, Peltier, De Wever, Nakate, and Bastida. We close read these texts to analyze how examples of the OGE in mass media frame young activists' positions

within global climate activism, as well as how the narratives and frames used by the activists themselves challenge the implications of being labeled a 'Greta.' Scholarly literature on global mass media, ecofeminism, decolonization, and climate justice, as well as scholarship on the rhetoric of Thunberg and other activists and its reception, informs our readings.

Morera Quesada chose the activists who serve as case studies because they hold influential positions within youth climate activism, yet they are given a less prominent position in global mass media than Thunberg. Moreover, as a racialized Costa Rican, Morera Quesada is passionate about creating intersectional platforms that uplift the voices of activists of color around the world. Their names, their stories, and their impact deserve to be known and listened to. As a scholar of Nordic studies working at an institution founded by Norwegian settlers on the homeland of the Wahpekute band of the Dakota nation, Coughlin is interested in how the OGE extends 'Nordic Whiteness' by representing the Nordic countries as promoters of moral goodness on the world stage (Lundström & Teitelbaum 2017), including ecological goodness, despite the unevenness of their actual environmental record (Anker 2020, 237–240; Hennig 2018, 3–5; Midttun & Olsson 2018).

The Other Greta Effect

The OGE has been ubiquitous since Thunberg became an icon of youth climate activism. A search for 'the Greta Thunberg of' in Access World News yielded 170 results between January 2019 and January 2024.[2] The most common instances of the phrase characterize a person—usually a girl or young woman—as the most prominent climate advocate from a particular country or region.[3] The search mentioned above yielded examples that reference nine nations or regions, including Pakistan, Ecuador, Argentina, China, America, Mexico, Bangladesh, the Amazon, and India. Some youth activists are named the 'Greta' of an entire continent, such as Ridhima Pandey, who has been called the "Greta Thunberg of Asia" (Bainbridge & Vimonsuk 2019).

In a sense, the OGE serves as a means of interpreting the larger movement to which young climate activists belong. In *Global Icons*, Ghosh argues that "mass-mediated images are precisely the widely and cheaply available means for apprehending global interconnections" (2011, 11). Global icons do not simply reflect "global" values but "legitimate historically and culturally particular aspirations as widely shared universal ones" (2011, 12). Having become iconic through the mass distribution of her image and speeches, Thunberg became a shorthand for understanding the global interconnections of the climate crisis. Appointing Thunberg as an icon of youth activism suggests that the world's youth face a common crisis and that Thunberg's pointed rhetoric and boldness in urging adults to act is an aspirational model for youth political participation. Thunberg has framed climate change as a human rights issue by focusing on how its effects violate the rights of children. Like other youth activists, she has presented herself as both a victim and a leader (Nisbett & Spaiser 2023, 9), emphasizing her status as a child who is harmed by climate change as well as a sharp critic of those in power. This rhetoric bears similarities to what Hesford calls the 'human rights spectacle'—a visual rhetoric that portrays individual girls, usually from the global South, as symbols of ongoing human rights abuses. Like other 'human rights spectacles,' Thunberg's likeness participates in "social and rhetorical processes of incorporation and recognition" into the "normative frameworks" of international human rights discourse (2011, 7). Her speeches and image have contributed to a normative framework in which continuing to emit fossil fuels is increasingly understood as a violation of the rights of children (Spaiser et al. 2022). But as a child of the wealthy global North, Thunberg is hardly the 'universal' face of climate injustice: She represents societies that are most responsible for the climate crisis, rather than those most impacted. Shiva and Mies argue that the discourse of "universal human rights" can facilitate "the global domination of local and particular interests, by means of subsuming the multiple diversities

of economies, cultures and of nature under the control of a few" corporations and governments (2014, 9). Framing the rights of children as a global cause can be used to justify activities, such as mining, carbon capture pipelines, or renewable energy development, against the interests or wishes of local people.

The OGE also presumes a particular audience perspective: As in the visual rhetoric of human rights that Hesford analyzes, promoting Thunberg as the icon for youth activism "support[s] the logic of a global morality market that privileges Westerners as world citizens" (2011, 9). An illustration of this logic can be found in headlines such as, "If Greta Thunberg inspires you, you'll love these 4 teen climate activists too" (Segran 2019). The audience is assumed to be a Western consumer whose moral position can be enhanced by adding other youth to the roster of activists they care about. Rather than having their unique perspectives and approaches recognized, these other activists become figures associated with the 'good cause' s that Thunberg symbolizes. As Hesford points out, portraying girls and women from the global South as "awaiting" help from the global North rather than "active agents in history" is commonplace in international human rights rhetoric (2011, 6). While not as disempowering as being framed as "victim[s]" in need of "rescue"" (Hesford 2011, 2), the OGE reproduces this logic, implying that activists needed the inspiration and recognition Thunberg's activism has afforded them to become effective advocates.

However, the universalizing effect of the OGE runs counter to Thunberg's own rhetoric. Thunberg has stressed the importance of climate justice since her earliest protests in 2018, and this focus has persisted in Fridays for Future, the global school strike movement that Thunberg helped to establish. Although other activist organizations have been calling for climate justice for decades (Chatterton 2013), Fridays for Future has been particularly effective in establishing climate justice as a normative framework in international climate deliberations (Nesbitt & Spaiser 2023; Spaiser et al. 2022). Activists committed to climate justice recognize that nations in the global South are "more vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change," but they are also attentive to the causes of this inequity and the various forms climate injustice can take (Madhanagopal et al. 2022, 2). As Madhanagopal et al. emphasize, "looking at climate change through a lens of justice reveals various socially constructed racial-ethnic, geopolitical, cultural, social, and economic inequalities" (2022, 1).

Climate justice is a recurring theme in Thunberg's speeches: She mentions "equity" and later "justice" in nearly every major speech delivered from 2018 to 2020 (Thunberg 2019). Addressing the Houses of Parliament in London in 2019, she describes children from wealthier countries such as Sweden as "the lucky ones," presumably because they are shielded from the worst impacts of climate change, since she adds, "Those who will be affected the hardest are already suffering the consequences, but their voices are not heard" (2019, 57). She also emphasizes the need for wealthier countries who have contributed most to climate change to take a greater share of responsibility for cutting emissions. In her speech "Almost Everything Is Black and White," she asks, "How can we expect countries like India and Nigeria to care about the climate crisis if we, who already have everything, don't care even a second about it or our actual commitments to the Paris Agreement?" (2019, 8). Such statements reflect a pattern in Thunberg's rhetoric of acknowledging her position of privilege while exposing how climate injustice has resulted from systems of oppression.

Yet, the OGE undermines Thunberg's emphasis on climate justice. Drawing on Desmond Tutu's use of the term "climate apartheid" rather than simply "injustice," Tuana argues, "We do not appreciate the complex nature of climate change apartheid if we understand it simply as differential impacts or differential treatment" (5). Instead, we need to notice the "interfusion of beliefs and dispositions with institutions and legal policies" through which oppression is normalized (2019, 5). "To appreciate the nature and import of climate change apartheid," she argues, "requires attention to the more subtle, normalized, and often muted ways in which systematic, institutional racism circulates in

societies, as well as the ways in which it is impacted by other forms of systemic oppression such as those due to gender, sexuality, or class" (2019, 5–6). The prevalence of the OGE reflects racist and neocolonial "beliefs and dispositions" about the legitimacy of White/global North leadership in addressing the climate crisis. Following Tuana's charge that we investigate "genealogically," we connect this belief to the discourse of "globalizing environmentalisms," which Sturgeon traces to the post-Cold War era (1999, 256). In this discourse, which established environmental protection as a 'global' concern, "Western countries are presented as locations of sane, world-saving scientific and political practices, while Third World countries are backwards, polluting, and dangerous locations in need of international environmental policing." As Sturgeon notes, such discourse is "widespread" in *The Limits to Growth*, which was co-authored by Norwegian Jørgen Rand (1999, 268). *The Limits to Growth* had a significant influence on *Our Common Future* (Anker 2020, 216–220), the report that both "reinvigorated" the term "sustainable development" and "brought global warming to the forefront" of the World Commission on Environment and Development (18). The chairman of the commission that authored *Our Common Future*, Gro Harlem Brundtland, was the first woman to serve as prime minister of Norway. Within a discourse of universal human rights, Thunberg's leadership represents a victory for girls' influence on climate politics, just as Brundtland's leadership was regarded as a sign of political progress for women. The success of both aligns with a common narrative of Nordic gender exceptionalism—that the Nordic countries have been particularly successful at achieving gender equality—as well as environmental exceptionalism (Hennig et al. 2018, 3–5). Framing Thunberg as a global icon for youth activism is meaningful in part because it conforms to existing perceptions of the Nordic countries as leaders on climate change policy. Hesford argues that one motivation for the 'human rights spectacle' is "the cultural politics of recognition—an identity-based politics of visibility—that dominated Western liberal feminism at the end of the 20th century and that directed public attention away from the regressive politics and growth of global capitalism" (2011, 7). While the OGE certainly affords recognition to activists beyond Thunberg, it tends to do so as part of a celebration of girls in leadership. In doing so, it can also draw attention away from these activists' pointed critiques of the global consumerism, growth-oriented capitalism, and the inequalities that make their experiences of the climate crisis so different.

Hesford acknowledges that "the human rights spectacle … in its more optimistic formations, holds the potential for social intervention and contestation" (2011, 6). In the case studies that follow, we provide examples in which the 'Greta' label has provided opportunities for young activists to intervene in neocolonial and racist discourses and contest dominant framings of climate change. An example of such critical engagement comes from the Nigerian author Chika Unigwe, who critiqued the OGE in *The Guardian* in 2019. Unigwe takes issue with the implication that other activists have followed Thunberg's lead:

For years, young people across the world have been campaigning to draw attention to the crisis our planet is facing, and to tackle it. … Yet, frustratingly these other activists are often referred to in the media as the 'Greta Thunberg' of their country, or are said to be following in her footsteps, even in cases where they began their public activism long before she started hers (2019).

Unigwe's critique identifies the OGE as a form of 'white saviorism':

> *The 'white savior' narrative invalidates the impact of locals working in their communities, and perpetuates the stereotype of 'the native with no agency' who cannot help themselves … It is insulting to present the members of the communities most threatened by climate change as passive onlookers who are only now being spurred on by the 'Thunberg effect' (2019).*

Here Unigwe points out that this seemingly innocent label in fact perpetuates harmful biases against people from the global South. Research

has shown that interest in climate change has been consistently higher in Africa than in Europe (Salerno 2023, 8). Thunberg did increase public interest in climate change, but the effect was stronger in wealthy countries with high emissions than in countries where people were already experiencing the effects of climate change (Salerno 2023, 8). Unigwe points out that the OGE persists despite the fact that Thunberg is "aware of and regularly mentions her fellow youth activists in her speeches, to remind journalists that there are others working alongside her." Unigwe's criticisms echo concerns expressed by scholars that climate change activism in the global South often goes unacknowledged and that those most impacted by climate change are underrepresented in research and policymaking (Mies and Shiva 2014; Madhanagopal et al. 2022; Marquardt et al. 2024).

Narratives of Youth Climate Activism

The four youth activists who form the case studies for this article have all been subjected to the OGE. Autumn Peltier has been referred to as "Canada's Own Greta Thunberg" (Hanson 2019), Anuna de Wever has been called the "Belgian Greta Thunberg" (Campbell 2020), Vanessa Nakate has been called a "Greta of the South" (Hernández 2019), and Xiye Bastida has been called "the Greta Thunberg of America" (Staff 2021). Mies and Shiva argue that the "capitalist-patriarchal perspective interprets difference as hierarchical and uniformity as a prerequisite for equality" (2). The OGE positions Thunberg as exceptional while simultaneously implying that every activist conforms to her model. However, differences in activists' perspectives and experiences are crucial for achieving climate justice. They seek to communicate with global audiences using scientific data, anecdotes, and personal observations, and by calling for collective action and climate justice. Tuana argues that "illegible lives are being constructed in the domain of climate practices and policies" due to lack of attention to race and racism (2019, 3). While the OGE may bring recognition to youth activists other than Thunberg, unless the specific legacies of colonialism and racism that impact them are recognized, being labeled a 'Greta' will not render them 'legible.'

One of the reasons Thunberg's rhetoric has been so effective is the strength of her personal narrative, as she communicates her individual experience in a compelling way, while addressing climate issues that affect a large number of people. Thunberg's rhetoric reflects shared experiences of the climate crisis, such as climate anxiety, climate doomism, and overall frustrations towards people in positions of power. In her analysis of Thunberg's activism as a form of life writing, Martínez García claims that Thunberg's voice possesses a polyphonic nature (2020, 354): she has the ability to raise not only her voice, but the voices of many other young people, including those who are most vulnerable to the effects of the climate crisis. In a 2019 speech before the Houses of Parliament in London, Thunberg stated, "I speak on behalf of future generations. I know many of you don't want to listen to us — you say we are just children" (2019, 55). Martínez García explains that Thunberg's use of 'I' in statements such as this "reasserts her identity as Greta" (2019, 355), while her use of 'we' refers to "the various social groups her activism is devoted to: children, autistic people, activists, and humans" (2019, 356). "The shifting personal pronouns employed by Greta Thunberg in her life-writing project," Martínez García argues, "exemplify a willingness to move beyond the personal and involve others in public advocacy and engagement" (2019, 358).

Sharing personal narratives is a method employed by many youth climate activists, including Autumn Peltier from the Wiikwemkoong First Nation on Manitoulin Island, Canada. Autumn Peltier has been an advocate for clean water since she was 8 years old and was appointed Chief Water Commissioner for the Anishinabek Nation in 2019. In September 2019, Peltier spoke during the Youth Climate Summit portion of the UN Climate Action Summit. Fridays for Future called for a global climate strike on the Friday before the event. Thunberg attended the strike in New York, having crossed the Atlantic to address the UN in August 2019. This was Peltier's second time addressing

the UN; she had also spoken on the issue of clean water in March 2018, several months before Thunberg's first strike in August 2018. In an interview, Peltier describes the audience in 2019 as more favorable to her message; she mentions, "I felt like I was being listened to" (Bengal 2019). By acting as a polyphonic megaphone, Thunberg brought attention to youth climate activism, which helped to amplify Peltier's voice in global media and gave her personal narrative legitimacy.

Peltier also acts as a polyphonic megaphone, but not always for the same social groups that Thunberg does. Peltier is the niece of activist Josephine Mandamin, a founding member of the water protectors movement, who urged Peltier to continue with her work after she passed. Peltier has stated, "Carrying on her legacy is one of the most important things to me" (Goddard 2022). Her work does not revolve solely around her personal narrative, but also continues the voices of those who came before her. Peltier seeks climate justice for her local community, her culture, and her immediate ecosystem, having spoken out against drinking water contamination on First Nations reserves as well as oil pipeline projects that threaten local watersheds. Peltier connects these threats to water with the legacy of colonization that allows developers and policymakers to disregard First Nations' cultural beliefs about water as well as their sovereignty. As a member of the Anishinabek Nation, Peltier can use 'we' to represent the broader concerns of First Nations communities, while Thunberg cannot. Thus, the OGE, while rightly expanding the notion of youth activism to include a variety of actors from around the world, obscures important differences in the environmental problems that individual activists can testify to and the communities they are able to represent.

Called the 'Greta of Belgium,' Anuna De Wever has received media attention due to the impact of their activism on Belgian climate policy. Inspired by Thunberg's model, they organized the first climate strike in Brussels, which was attended by more than 35,000 people (Hess 2020). However, despite being one of the most prominent figureheads in youth climate activism in Europe, De Wever states, "One of the biggest things we've been trying to do is to pass the mic to people in the global south" (Hess 2020). This 'we' is used to express the perspective of activists from the global North who seek to show solidarity in the pursuit of climate justice. One way of doing so is by insisting that youth from the global South have the opportunity to speak for themselves. Although being labeled a 'Greta' does not have the racial or colonial implications for De Wever that it has for Black, brown, or Indigenous activists, the label does disregard De Wever's gender identity. Like the 'human rights spectacle' described by Hesford, the OGE elicits sympathy for Thunberg by emphasizing her girlhood and highlighting her "youth, beauty, and innocence" (Hesford 2011, 1). A nonbinary activist such as De Wever is seen as incompatible with this feminine norm, causing them to be misgendered in the media.[4] This is both harmful to them personally and obscures the gender diversity present in the youth climate activism movement.

Whichever personal narrative these activists decide to share, being labeled 'Gretas' tends to represent them as exceptional individuals following Thunberg's model. However, studies of media portrayals of Thunberg and other youth activists as 'heroes' demonstrate that when applied by others, such narratives can be patronizing and display a tendency to elevate Thunberg's role over that of other activists (Bergmann & Ossewaarde 2020; Coughlin & Hauck 2023; Moriarty 2021; Ryalls & Mazzarella 2021). Similarly, feminist studies of the figure of the 'girl activist' as presented in popular media have critiqued heroic framings of girls who engage in politics: Drawing on work by Banet-Weiser and Taft, Locke argues, "Even if unwittingly, depictions of a girl's politics as heroic amplifies her hostile circumstances and diminishes her networks of support and solidarity and the bonds that animate them" (2023, 120). Locke adds that "hyper-individualized stories of white girl activists both efface the collective work they are doing and privilege white activists at the expense of girls of color, particularly Black girls" (2023, 120). Though these heroic narratives follow a traditional, individualistic model, youth climate activists themselves often strive to decenter the "main hero," directing

attention instead to their collective efficacy (Molder et al. 2022). Their narratives more closely conform to what Moriarty has called "community as hero," which "celebrate[s] collective action while also working to hold accountable the groups and organizations that continue to destroy environments" (2021, 207).

Locke highlights Nakate's story in addition to Thunberg's "with the hopes of recentering both activists' stories beyond the individual 'girl hero' frame, while being attuned [to] the anti-feminist, neocolonial, and white supremacists conditions that shape climate politics and the young activists' work" (2023, 122). Rather than lone heroes, Locke's analysis of their origin stories and activities demonstrates the different "institutions and networks" to which both activists belong (2023, 123). Research on the attitudes of Fridays for Future (FFF) participants in Europe found a positive relationship between the extent of Thunberg's influence on participants' activism and "their identification with the other protesters present, hence a shared sense of collective identity" (Wahlström & Uba 2023, 11). To the extent to which Thunberg mobilizes other activists, she seems to do so by "contributing to a sense of cohesion and common purpose" (2023, 12), rather than inspiring them to undertake individual heroic actions. By utilizing this collective narrative, youth climate activists strengthen the polyphonic nature of their rhetoric and amplify the voice of not a single individual, but a diverse generation that has coalesced around a common goal.

'Other Gretas' Defying Illegibility

The examples presented thus far demonstrate how climate activists have taken the OGE as an opportunity to contest the ways this framing renders their particular identities and experiences "illegible" (Tuana 2020, 3). As Tuana argues, societies in the global North and global South are not "equally vulnerable to the many types of violence perpetuated by systematic oppression" (Tuana 2020, 19); hence, activists are experiencing the effects of the climate crisis differently, as well as other social issues related to "gender, sexuality, or class" (Tuana 2020, 5-6). When youth climate activists are given attention by calling them the 'Greta' of their country, many of the "complex exchanges between racism and environmental exploitation" are ignored (Tuana 2020, 6). By utilizing a "global feminisms" framework in which girls' political advancement is the main focus, the OGE gives "inadequate attention to the intersectional approach" (Chowdhury 2009, 56, 60). However, youth climate activists have themselves sought to draw attention to the complexities of their own experiences with climate change and their unique positions as activists.

Vanessa Nakate was moved to critique the disproportionate attention paid to White climate activists after being rendered not just illegible, but invisible. At a Fridays for Future press conference coinciding with the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2019, Nakate was photographed by the Associated Press (AP) along with several fellow White activists— Thunberg included. However, when the photograph appeared on the AP news website, Nakate had been cropped out. In response, Nakate tweeted, "You didn't just erase a photo. You erased a continent" (Nakate 2021, 69). In her book *A Bigger Picture*, Nakate describes her reaction as a mix of hurt, anger, and frustration (2021, 65–79). Being cropped out of the picture for Nakate was not only about having her individual contributions ignored, but about the broader exclusion of Africa from climate change discourse.

The decision to crop Nakate out of a photograph of White girls could be linked to the racialized iconography of the "innocent child" in environmental rhetoric: Lakind connects Thunberg to the character Susan Spotless from Keep America Beautiful (KAB)'s 1964 environmental campaign—a young, White girl characterized as "as sacrosanct and requiring of protection" (Lakind 2020). Lakind argues that Susan Spotless enforces a narrative that White children are inherently more capable of protecting the environment due to their innocence and cleanliness. Conversely, racialized children are characterized as "resilient, unruly, and in need of management," reinforcing the idea that their White counterparts exist to save

them from their "unruly" ways. In a similar account of the intersections between race and the politics of girlhood, Taft argues that the "identities and political visions" of racialized activists "are perhaps more challenging to contain or less desirable for public consumption" than those of White activists (2020, 8). It could be argued that this lack of desirability stems from the threat their positionality as individuals of color living in marginalized communities represents to systems of oppression. Therefore, since Nakate does not conform to the racialized ideal of the "innocent child," she is excluded from the climate activism narrative.

At the same time, in being singled out as the 'Greta of Africa,' Nakate has her status elevated above that of other African activists. Nakate challenges this tokenism by asserting the importance of diverse movements, also within socially marginalized communities: "There are times when I ask if another activist could be interviewed, and there are always questions of 'What is [their] background? Are they eloquent enough? Have they spoken before?'" (Chan 2021). Similarly, in her book, *A Bigger Picture*, she writes of the pressure she felt to represent "those Ugandans and other Africans who couldn't be at the UN Youth Climate Summit, COP 25, or Davos. … In erasing me, the AP erased climate activists across the continent who were trying to show that the climate crisis *was* an African issue; along with the fact that Africans were being most affected" (2021, 73). This demonstrates that racialized youth climate activists, especially Black girls, experience more pressure than their White counterparts, as they are often charged with representing a larger and more diverse community with fewer resources (Marquardt et al. 2024). As Locke points out, activists such as Nakate do not simply "replicate Thunberg's model": In writing that she "decided to emulate Greta," Nakate means that Thunberg served as "a touch point for Nakate's strategizing and developing a sense of her work as connected to others and the world" (2023, 123). Through her social media platform as well as her memoir *A Bigger Picture*, Nakate points out how erasure and tokenization of her as an individual reflects the broader problem of illegibility that marginalized communities in Africa experience within climate change discourse.

Xiye Bastida, a Mexican-born, U.S. migrant, has also used the experience of being labeled a 'Greta' as an opportunity to challenge its homogenizing effects. Bastida writes that the first time she was called the "Greta Thunberg of America," her initial response was positive: "I was gladly surprised because it gave me a feeling of validation. It made me feel that I was doing something right" (Bastida 2020). The second time, however, she felt disillusioned: "I realized that calling me 'America's Greta Thunberg' was not designed to be empowering for me, but rather, it was a tactic designed to get more clicks on the article." For youth climate activists, a space in global media, even if it is a comparative space, is a form of acknowledgement of their activism. However, activists who are more impacted by climate change due to environmental injustice experience frustration when this label draws attention away from the particular impacts of climate change they and their communities are experiencing. The Otomí Indigenous community to which Bastida belongs is facing challenges to their cultural continuity due to threats to their land: deforestation and pipelines have forced many to migrate. Bastida insists that the climate activism movement must be diverse, echoing Thunberg's own statements that no single activist should be the center of attention. She frames this thought as a climate justice issue by stating, "singling out climate activists tends to invisiblize the diversity of stories of those who are living in conditions of poverty and pollution now exacerbated by the climate crisis" (Bastida 2020). As Bastida writes, "Calling me 'the Greta Thunberg of the United States' distorts my experiences, my struggles, inspiration—my story. But most critically, it diminishes the years of resilience that racialized activists have endured." Here Bastida critiques the OGE for effacing the long history of activism outside the global North. But Bastida also points out how the OGE diminishes Thunberg's unique experiences and identity. Thunberg has argued that her autism shapes her experience with the climate crisis because it allows her to see it as black or white situation: you either reduce emissions or accept

the end of civilization (2019, 6). Thunberg has a unique approach to activism, just as Bastida has hers. Both Nakate and Bastida seek to add more context and complexity to the story of their activism; in doing so, they make their communities more legible. By voicing their misgivings about being labeled a 'Greta,' they intervene in global climate discourse, creating space for "strategic coalitions to take place among disempowered people and between privileged and underprivileged people in one political collectivity" (Madhanagopal et al. 2022, 291).

A Visual Alternative: The Global Youth Activists Map

These four young climate activists' reflections on the OGE represent an intervention in media discourse about climate change as a global issue. Among the benefits they mention are the increased attention they receive due to their association with Thunberg, more receptive audiences as youth activism is afforded greater legitimacy, and a sense of validation that their work is effective. They also credit comparisons to Thunberg with diversifying the representation of climate activists, and they express the hope that associations between their work and hers will contribute to the perception that their movement is cohesive and shares a common purpose. At the same time, they recognize that the OGE can relegate them to side characters in a narrative in which Thunberg is the central protagonist. Moreover the OGE can result in activists being tokenized as the sole representative for large, heterogenous communities, subjecting them to greater scrutiny and undermining the goal of bringing a diversity of voices into the climate conversation.

Lack of recognition is not a problem limited to youth climate activists. As Madhanagopal et al. insist, "Glaring knowledge gaps exist in the research regarding the growing diversity and complexity of the environmental movements in the low-income and socially marginalized regions outside Europe and North America" (2022, 2). Attending to the complexities of specific environmental harms experienced by particular communities is important for achieving climate justice. Rather than "general accounts" of climate injustice, Tuana argues that "our ecologically informed intersectional analyses must be to the detailed, historical, spatial, situated genealogies of the incorporations of racism and environmental exploitations" (2019, 22). The Global Youth Activists map is an intervention meant to address these knowledge gaps and amplify the voices of activists from marginalized communities (Morera Quesada 2022). Published on the Responses to Thunberg website, the map provides access to information about 35 young climate activists from around the world. The map includes basic information such as the names, hometowns, and birth dates of youth activists, as well as their impact and a significant text by or about them (e.g., an interview, article, personal essay/blog entry, or YouTube video). ArcGIS, the software used to create the map, allows the viewer to learn about these activists as well as visualize their geographic distribution.

Activists were identified for inclusion by three methods: 1) their name was mentioned in an article in which Thunberg's name was also mentioned, 2) they were featured in an article about youth climate activism, and/or 3) through a simple internet search: climate activist in X country. Another consideration was how much information was available about them—for example the city they come from and the environmental problem in their country that led them to speak up. Their birth year was also important to include because it shows the trajectory of their activism: some activists started their environmental advocacy at a much younger age than Thunberg. The texts associated with each activist further inform users on the positionality and experiences of the different activists. These pieces were specifically chosen to showcase their voices, opinions, and personal projects. Their approaches vary widely, which demonstrates the diversity of the climate activism movement: from founding alliances to planting a tree for every soccer goal scored to writing songs, these young people have found innovative and creative ways to tackle the climate crisis.

Whereas global media outlets have the power to decide who the next 'Greta' is, this map empowers young people to choose which activists they want to know more about. It can be shared online, allowing users to contribute to promoting knowledge about activists beyond Thunberg. Through increased knowledge, users can better understand the importance of diverse participation in climate activism and policy, especially by those most impacted by climate change. As Madhanagopal et al. argue, "everybody—and particularly those in the Global South who often find themselves alienated from their basic human rights—should be allowed to actively partake and influence decisions that impact their livelihoods, environments, and living conditions in one way or another" (2022, 4). While young users may not be equipped to perform the kind of "ecologically informed intersectional analyses" Tuana calls for, the Global Youth Activists Map provides the initial information they need to delve deeper into the causes and consequences of the specific environmental problems young activists from marginalized communities are facing. Although the map is a small gesture toward addressing a significant knowledge gap, it gives young users agency to explore beyond Thunberg and find young activists with whom they can identify and begin to practice solidarity.

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Notes

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[2] This study focuses on the rhetoric surrounding Thunberg while she was still a child participating in school strikes. We have not considered her activism since she has become an adult and has been subject to legal consequences for her participation in non-violent direct action.

[3] A few examples label an individual as a climate leader within a particular domain, such as the British runner Innes Fitzgerald, who has earned the moniker, "the Greta Thunberg of sport" for her refusal to fly to competitions (Passmore 2023).

[4] For an article in Spanish misgendering De Wever, see "La adolescente que levanta a los institutos belgas contra el cambio climático" (Sánchez 2019).