

Transnational Environmental Justice Rhetorics and the Green Belt Movement: Wangari Muta Maathai's Ecological Rhetorics and Literacies

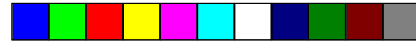
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In August of 2010, heavy monsoon rains brought on deadly mudslides that swept through northwest China in Gansu Province, leaving over a thousand people dead or buried in the mudslide's aftermath. Although driving rains were a major factor, the mudslide in Zhouqu was caused, in part, by deforestation, the result of forty years of environmentally unsound development decisions. As *Christian Science Monitor* reporter Peter Ford indicates, "Official records show that government-run lumber companies cut 313,000 acres of forest from the slopes of Zhouqu county between 1952 and 1990, denuding the geologically vulnerable mountainsides and subjecting them to soil erosion." Chinese scientists had even predicted the disaster in a paper they published in 1997, noting that deforestation in Zhouqu would worsen the risk of mudslides. This fairly recent disaster is yet another incidence of environmentally unsound development decisions worsening the effects of global climate change, itself a result of problematic development decisions and energy policies, such as overreliance on fossil fuels.

Often the local, national, and international press emphasizes the aftermath of natural disasters, the destruction and death toll, not the string of economic and environmental choices that led to the root causes of these "natural" disasters. Increasingly, though, in the wake of global climate change, transnational environmental activists have begun to call attention to and take action on the root causes of many of these "natural" disasters.

Deforestation, as noted above, is a major contributor to environmental disasters, desertification, and to global climate change. As the Forest

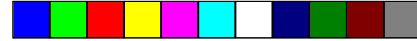
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Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) indicates in “What is REDD+,” an acronym that stands for Reduce Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation, “[d]eforestation and forest degradation are the second leading cause of global warming, responsible for about 15% of global greenhouse gas emissions” (“What”). Forests are an important part of the global climate change equation because “[e]ighty percent of the Earth’s above-ground terrestrial carbon and forty percent of below-ground terrestrial carbon” are contained in forests. REDD, therefore, is thought to be one of the best and cheapest ways to decrease greenhouse gas emissions (“What”).

To address the global problem of deforestation in some of the most vulnerable and ecologically important areas of the world, one of the most effective and visible grassroots organizations has been the Green Belt Movement, a reforestation movement that began in Kenya and has gained momentum in other African countries, inspiring activists in the West as well. This article will offer a rhetorical analysis of Kenyan environmentalist activist and women’s rights advocate Dr. Wangari Muta Maathai and her work with the Green Belt Movement (GBM). During the time in which I was writing and researching this article, Maathai, unfortunately, passed away from cancer on September 25, 2011 at the age of 71, leaving a strong legacy of environmental activism (Vidal) that activists and rhetorical scholars interested in the environment and feminism can learn from through study and analysis.

In 2004, Maathai gained worldwide fame for her achievements when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for the GBM, a grassroots/NGO organization of women engaged in community-based tree planting and poverty reduction in Kenya and other African countries. Honoring African women’s practical knowledge of cultivation of trees and seeds instead of forcing technical education, the GBM has succeeded in valuing the knowledges and ecological literacies already present in rural African women’s communities and sponsoring ecological literacies that sustain women’s livelihoods (see Brandt). By ecological literacy, I am referring to many commonly perpetuated definitions of ecological or environmental literacy that address environmental awareness and action as a form of literacy. David Orr has referred to ecological literacy as a multi-faceted process of humans:



- “observ[ing] nature with insight” (86)
- “distinguish[ing] between health and disease in natural systems in relation to health and disease in human ones” (86)
- developing a sense of place, of “direct contact with the natural aspects of a place, with soils, landscapes, and wildlife” (89)
- possessing a “quality of mind that seeks out connections” (92) [what I will refer to later as a rhetoric of “connectivity”]

The ecologically literate person brings to the table an understanding of the earth’s “physical system,” ecology, its “vital signs,” human ecology, the “natural history of one’s own region,” and how to “restore natural systems and build sustainable communities and economies” (Orr 92–93).

While it cannot be said that Maathai and the GBM perpetuate all aspects of Orr’s ecological literacy, the GBM embraces most of these concepts through experiential education, through valuing the knowledge that people living deeply in places already possess. Since the founding of the organization, Maathai and the GBM have persuaded many to join their movement to plant 40 million trees on farms, schools, and church compounds and compelled others worldwide to deploy treeplanting as a sustainable development enterprise.

The major way in which the Green Belt Movement disseminates its vision of ecological literacy is through grassroots organizing, but also through a variety of publications: four books by Maathai, the Green Belt website containing reports, newsletters, and videos of media appearances, several documentaries, and Maathai’s speaking engagements at United Nations meetings, at global climate change summits, and at colleges and universities, one of which was in 2006 at Syracuse University, my home institution. The GBM also has networked globally since 1986 when it established a Pan-African Green Belt Network. A little over a decade later, the GBM had a presence in 30 African nations (“Case” 4) and has “spread across the world, emerging in the United States, United Kingdom, West India, Japan and South America” (5). After Kenya’s election crisis and the corresponding outbreak of violence in 2007, the GBM began extending its work further into community development



efforts, including the “Peace Tent Initiative,” which encourages “reconciliation between ethnic groups that have clashed in the past” (4).

My analysis of the GBM’s rhetoric of grassroots organizing will be two-fold: to analyze 1) how Maathai and the GBM use rhetorical “symbols—words, signs, images, music, even bodies” to perpetuate ecological literacy and persuade citizens to take up the cause of treeplanting and sustainable development locally and globally (Morris and Browne 1); 2) the ways in which the GBM makes arguments for global environmental justice, women’s rights in Africa, and poverty reduction by deploying the transnational processes of diffusion, domestication, externalization, and collective action (della Porta and Tarrow 2). The GBM has provided activists a model for transnational environmental activism that can be applied broadly to remedy the devastating effects of climate change and create a model of sustainable development in Africa that is adaptable beyond the continent. The GBM also has provided an overarching rhetorical symbol for the global environmental justice movement: the tree and its ability to absorb carbon; to provide shade, fruit, firewood; and to anchor the soil against erosion. The “tree” has become the chief rhetorical symbol of the Green Belt movement, perhaps second only to the rhetorical presence of Wangari Maathai herself. In doing this work, Maathai has modeled a form of transnational ecological literacy, feminist rhetoric, and global citizenship that demonstrates her commitment to her homeland, to empowering rural women to undertake sustainable development, and to cross-border ecological activism.

Studying Transnational Social Movements

First, however, a word about studying transnational social movements seems necessary. As scholars of social movements across the disciplines have noted, since the 1960s, “social, cultural, and geopolitical changes have begun to transform social movements’ institutional and cultural environments” (della Porta and Tarrow 1). This has meant a shift in political power from national to supranational institutions like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (2). A focus on market forces and logics has led to power being



consolidated in neoliberal economic policies executed by transnational corporations often in cooperation with national governments. As political and economic power has shifted within these conditions, so have social movements. Informal networks of activists take action across borders, responding to specific social, economic, and political issues such as the environment, labor, human rights, human trafficking, and global trade policies (2). Social movement researchers have begun to study in earnest what these changes mean for cross-border activism and organizing, identifying different ways that social movements and their rhetorics operate transnationally as well as nationally. As social movement researchers Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow note, three processes of transnationalization have occurred within social movements: diffusion, “the spread of movements, ideas, practices, and frames from one country to another”; domestication, “the playing out on domestic territory of conflicts that have their origin externally”; and externalization, the “challenge to supranational institutions to intervene in domestic problems or conflicts” (2). All three processes are evident in GBM rhetorics and practices. Perhaps more importantly, the GBM is demonstrative of the wider trend in “transnational collective action,” “*coordinated international campaigns on the part of networks of activists against international actors, other states, or international institutions*” (2-3). My account will consider all four factors with respect to the GBM’s main rhetorical strategies for encouraging local and global sustainable development.

GBM Narratives and History: Rhetorics of Domestication and Connectivity

In *The Green Belt Movement*, Maathai describes the history of the GBM as a non-governmental organization (NGO) that began in the 1970s out of a concern in Kenya for “environmental conservation and development” (6). Maathai proudly underscores the fact that the GBM is an “indigenous initiative, registered and headquartered in Nairobi” and run by Kenyans who rely upon “local capacity, knowledge, wisdom and expertise where appropriate” (6). As mentioned earlier, it is also an NGO

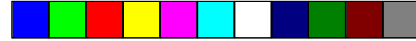


that has branch initiatives in other countries and a website that publicizes its transnational work.

Prior to the organization taking flight in the 1970s, there was a reforestation effort known as “Men of the Trees” led by Senior Chief Josiah Njongjo and Dr. St. Barbe Baker. This organization was active for awhile, but waned in Kenya after Njongjo’s death (8). Also, the GBM was spurred by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), establishing a branch known as the Environment Liaison Centre (ELC) in Nairobi “as a result of the United Nations Conference on Human Environment” that was held in Stockholm in 1972 (8). It was to the ELC board that Maathai was appointed and eventually became the Chair, bringing to the table her “background as a biological scientist and daughter of a peasant farmer” (9). (Her mother grew subsistence crops to feed her family and pay Maathai’s school bills.)

As Maathai indicates in her memoir *Unbowed*, she grew up cultivating her own small plot of land, eventually attending college in the United States at Mt. St. Scholastica as part of Kennedy’s Africa Lift (graduating in 1964), and then the master’s program at the University of Pittsburgh (1966) before returning to Kenya to work. She spent time in Germany at the University of Giessen and the University of Bavaria (107-108), receiving her doctorate in 1971 from the University of Nairobi in Veterinary Medicine, becoming the “first woman in East and Central Africa to receive a doctoral degree” (113). In 2003, she was elected by a margin of 98% as Assistant Minister of the Environment in Kenya (127), thus becoming part of the government that had once harassed her for a very public divorce from her husband and that had jailed and beaten her for non-violent social activism.

In her memoir *Unbowed*, Maathai describes the strong connection and identification with the environment that she established during her childhood. She narrates her dawning awareness of the natural world drawn from familiar contact with a place and family teachings, a very hands-on ecological literacy. She also successfully conveys that experience in the form of a narrative that instructs readers in ecological literacy. As a Kikuyu child growing up in rural Kenya, Maathai observed wild fig or *migumo* trees near a stream in her home village where she would gather water and firewood; her mother taught her refer to the *migumo* trees as



“Trees of God,” and she was cautioned not to cut, burn, or even gather their dead wood (45). Maathai lyrically describes the trees as having “bark the color of elephant skin and thick, gnarled branches with roots springing out and anchoring the tree to the ground,” offering up to a “sixty foot” green canopy of shade with “dense undergrowth” (44). Two hundred yards away, fed by an underwater spring referred to as *Kanangu*, bubbled a stream that supplied the family’s water (45). Later in life, Maathai learned that the root systems of the fig trees reached deeply into the ground, broke up rocks under the soil, and served as conduits for water to travel up and gush out as a spring. The idea that *migumo* trees were sacred and should not be cut down allowed the trees to remain and the root system to continue to bring water to the surface. As Maathai notes: “[t]he trees also held the soil together, reducing erosion and landslides” (46).

The symbol of this originary fig tree from Maathai’s childhood has become an anchor image and chief rhetorical symbol, both literally and figuratively, of her work to educate and empower African women through sustainable development. As she says in a December 19, 2005 broadcast for *ABC News*, excerpted on the Green Belt Movement website, the act of planting a tree has been characterized as a peaceful act, leading people to refer to Maathai as planting “trees of peace” (also the title of a children’s book about her life). However, Maathai sees a tree as more than a symbol of peace; it is a symbol of sustainable environmental change:

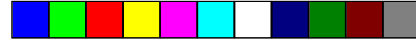
What I would like people to understand [is] the tree is a symbol. A lot of wars that we are fighting on the planet today have to do with these national resources. The campaign [GBM] tries to empower the grass roots, women, then every person in the community to do something about their environment. The tree for me is hope, it is the future. When I look at the tree I see promise. It starts from a seed. Eventually it becomes a huge tree. It becomes an ecosystem in itself. It is a home for other species. It is a symbol of many things. A tree is everything to me. (“Trees”)

The tree is part of an ecosystem, but is a synecdoche, standing in for an entire ecosystem, a symbol to Maathai of the literal “rhetorical ecology” she has spread (see Edbauer). Ironically, it seems as if the tree is an extension of Maathai, with many people referring to her as the “tree woman” or the “tree mother” of Kenya.



Maathai's interest in tree-planting, described in *The Green Belt Movement*, extends back thirty years to 1974 when she became interested in forestation and reforestation while helping her husband Mwangi campaign as a Member of Parliament "for Lang'ata, a constituency in Nairobi province" (9). While on the campaign trail, Maathai heard from many people who wanted jobs and ways to sustain themselves. She came up with the idea of tree-planting as a means of job creation (11). After her husband was elected, Maathai worked with local people in Lang'ata to start a tree nursery. Once that effort was launched, she formed the company Envirocare Ltd., a firm with the stated mission to "clean up the homesteads of residents in Lang'ata as well as plant trees where necessary" (12). Maathai narrates the ups and downs of the early years of Envirocare in *The Green Belt Movement*, noting that she was spurred on in difficult times by her attendance at United Nations conferences and the encouragement she received from a global community of activists; in her homeland, she was often discouraged, discriminated against, and mistrusted by the government, often due to her gender and ethnic identity, which I will address later. She came back from the 1976 United Nations conference and allied the company Envirocare with the National Council of Women of Kenya, NCWK, which more firmly located the project's nexus in advocacy work for and by Kenyan women (14–15). In 1977 the NCWK accepted the tree-planting campaign as a project. The name it was referred to originally was "Save the Land *Harambee*," a name in which *Harambee* means "Let us all pull together" in Kiswahili (20). The participants in starting up a tree nursery in a given site made a pledge to combat desertification through forestation and reforestation by reciting a commitment statement that was stated at their very first tree-planting event on June 5, 1977:

Being aware that Kenya is being threatened by the expansion of desert-like conditions; that desertification comes as a result of misuse of the land and by consequent soil erosion by the elements, and that these actions result in drought, malnutrition, famine and death; we resolve to save our land by averting these same desertification through the planting of trees wherever possible. In pronouncing these words, we each make a personal commitment to save our country from actions and elements, which would deprive

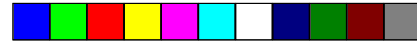


present and future generations from reaping the bounty [of resources] which is the birthright and property of all. (21)

This statement is an act of collective responsibility and identification by which all involved in tree-planting pledge to take collective action for the future of the environment. In launching the work initially, “Save the Land Harambee” pledged to “plant fifteen (15) million trees throughout the country,” Kenya’s population at the time, using the motto “One person—one tree” (25). “Save the Land Harambee” eventually became the GBM.

Maathai’s rationale for tree-planting, as she describes it in *The Green Belt Movement* and in the statement above, was that it would allow rural women and their communities to “inexpensively meet many of their needs, including wood fuel, building and fencing material, and soil conservation” (17). Tree-planting, though, was in direct contrast to the legacy of agriculture emphasized by British colonialism in Africa, which focused on cash-crop farming (tea, coffee) instead of subsistence farming. In addition, “severe mismanagement in government parastatals, cooperatives, and the local management committees” resulted in uneven payments to farmers and did not enable them to feed their families (18). Also, with fields being cleared there was a failing supply of wood for cooking fires. Residents began to fall back on easier-to-cook foods or foods that could be eaten raw, thus resulting in changes in traditional diets, causing malnutrition among some peoples (19–20).

In her arguments assessing the problems Kenya faced at that moment in history, Maathai emphasizes a transnational rhetoric of domestication, “the playing out on domestic territory of conflicts that have their origin externally” (della Porta and Tarrow 2). Maathai and GBM supporters founded the GBM to solve a problem that had been thrust upon the Kenyan people by the legacy of British colonialism and monocultural production not unlike what has happened in many parts of the world with the so-called Green Revolution (see Shiva). In *The Challenge for Africa*, Maathai repeatedly refers to the fact that deforestation was aided and abetted by colonialism and later by neoliberal economic development policies. Yet, at the same time, she argues that acknowledging the legacies of colonialism must be tempered with an awareness of how existing problems in African such as “conflicts, warlordism, corruption,

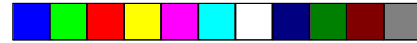


poverty, dependency, and mismanagement” cannot be solely blamed upon colonialism (5). She argues that we must understand our interconnectedness and implication in choices and systems that can destroy our worlds even as we attempt to sustain ourselves, another aspect of ecological literacy. She amply illustrates a rhetoric of “connectivity” in many of the narratives she proffers about African women—for instance, in the narrative of the “woman of Yaounde,” a “dilemma tale” that she tells in the *Challenge for Africa*, which I address below.

Emphasizing interconnectedness or “connectivity” across an ecosystem is a key feature of ecological literacy (see Orr), and it also a key rhetorical feature of the narratives Maathai deploys to describe the work of the Green Belt Movement. Connectivity is also a key concept within transnational studies. In *Transnational America*, feminist scholar Inderpal Grewal describes transnational connectivities as processes whereby “subjects, technologies, and ethical practices were created through transnational networks and connections of many different types and within which the ‘global’ and the ‘universal’ were created as linked and dominant concepts” (3). For Maathai, Grewal’s notion of transnational connective processes of “subjects, technologies, and ethical practices” includes seeing African women as subjects engaged in subsistence farming; the technologies are their farming practices; and their ethical practices are their relationship with the places they live and their local environments, their communities, and the globe. However, to be connected, as rhetoricians have pointed out, is also to be affectively engaged with a specific community or place. Jenny Edbauer has argued that to be “networked” and “connected” is to also be aware of the affective dimension of rhetorics:

To say that we are connected is another way of saying that we are never outside the networked interconnection of forces, energies, rhetorics, moods, and experiences. In other words, our practical consciousness is never outside the prior and ongoing structures of feeling that shape the social field. (10)

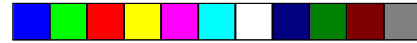
In her work, Maathai is able to address those affective dimensions by creating a sense of identification with the subjects of her stories, the women of Africa who are struggling to make a living through subsistence



farming and tree-planting. She is also able to create a sense of identification with the land that African women are seeking to cultivate and that we, as global citizens, must be concerned about as a finite resource. Moreover, she encourages us as readers to think about our own relationship with the environment, the places we inhabit and engage in our communities.

A key example in which she addresses the rhetoric of connectivity is through the aforementioned narrative or “dilemma tale” of the “woman of Yaounde.” In *The Challenge for Africa*, Maathai narrates how, as Goodwill Ambassador for the Congo Basin Forest Ecosystem in 2005, she traveled to Yaounde, the capitol city of Cameroon (11). One morning at the hotel where she was staying, she observed a group of male and female subsistence farmers on an adjacent hill; the farmers had cleared out vegetation and were planting banana and cassava trees, carving out furrows that ran downhill rather than across the hill (12). Maathai writes that the woman farmer she observed on the hill was “guaranteeing that the soil, one of her most precious natural resources and one she’d so carefully formed and so desperately needed to make her crops grow, would be swept down the hillside when the rains fell—in the very furrows she had just dug!” (13). These very practices would make it impossible for anything to grow on the hillside in the future. This moment of observation revealed to Maathai the true challenge for Africa: addressing the needs and survival strategies of women subsistence farmers, “several million in Cameroon and several million more in the ten countries of the Congo Basin region and, indeed, throughout Africa” (14). She observes that the woman of Yaounde’s farming practices are certainly not the greatest threat in this region; mining and timber companies also contribute to environmental degradation through creating logging roads, clearing trees, and opening up lands for subsistence farmers and poachers looking for bush meat (14). These combined practices cause erosion and bring on desertification, threatening local ecosystems and planetary survival since the Congo forest is thought of as the “world’s ‘second lung,’” second only to the Amazon rainforest (13).

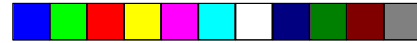
Maathai uses the narrative of the woman of Yaounde to call attention to the connectivity between international policy meetings, such as the one she was attending that morning for the Commission for the Forests of



Central Africa (COMIFAC), and the woman farmer on the hillside. She argues for transnational collective action on the part of “government ministers, university professors, civil society activists, and development specialists” who must create “policies and legislation both within and across our countries’ borders for utilizing natural resources sustainably and sharing them more equitably” (14-15). In other words, she argues that development decision-makers must cultivate development practices and policies that help subsistence farmers like the woman of Yaounde adopt sustainable farming practices. Maathai muses about all the local, national, and international development efforts that have failed this woman and not “trickled down” to help her farm sustainably; she wonders if leaders making development decisions would have even *seen* the woman of Yaounde on the hillside as they departed the hotel (17). It is this very woman, though, that development officials and government officials must work with as she represents the “65% percent of Africans who continue to rely on subsistence agriculture” (18).

To address the woman of Yaounde’s needs, Maathai argues that policymakers and development leaders must acquire ecological literacies that allow them to understand the challenges that African women face as they seek to feed their families. In order to change unsustainable farming practices, the woman of Yaounde must be introduced to different ones and given different options—options that make sense in relation to her situation and needs. Maathai cites all the ways that various government agencies and groups could be helping this woman farmer have access to education, training, land, and resources (15–16). However, one of the barriers to this happening is visibility and identification—most leaders would not notice or identify with this woman or know her story.

It is Maathai’s work and background with women engaging in subsistence farming that allows her to *see* and understand the woman of Yaounde while other development experts might not even notice her (17). Through this narrative, Maathai allows readers to understand connectivities—connections between this woman’s need to survive, the unsustainable farming practices she is engaging in aided and abetted by distinct government priorities and choices, the impact of those practices on the environment, and the need for policy makers and experts to account



for the realities and experiences of African women in their development policies.

It is Maathai's ability to help audiences understand and identify with her experiences as an African woman and that of other rural African women that allows her to create a compelling narrative for the Green Belt Movement, captured in her various speeches and writings. Rhetorical scholar Russell Kirkscey argues that Maathai makes use of the cultural rhetorics of the African oral tradition—namely, the African dilemma story—to buttress her arguments, noting that “[d]ilemma tales teach values and ethics through discussion of the various possibilities of solving a particular problem outlined in a narrative with no resolution” (15). In his rhetorical analysis of Maathai's 2004 Nobel Prize acceptance speech and her work with the Green Belt Movement, Kirkscey finds salient features of African dilemma tales, whose main function is “to practice the art of argumentation and to discuss ethical issues” without giving participants a specific answer (15). Thus, participants in dilemma tales are encouraged to reason their way through these narratives and reach their own conclusions. The storyteller, though, may model approaches and suggest courses of action.

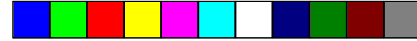
Maathai deploys the narrative of the woman of Yaounde, a sort of African “everywoman,” as a type of environmental dilemma tale. She encourages readers to rhetorically identify with the narrative of the woman of Yaounde, her needs, realities, and challenges, a rhetorical pattern she replicates across all of GBM's advocacy arguments, an argument strategy that allies her with the rhetoric of the environmental justice movement. As environmental rhetoric scholars Ronald Sandler and Phaedra Pezzullo note, the environmental justice movement is about redefining how we make knowledge about the environment by “emphasizing how grassroots communities express their experiences and the knowledge they have to share” (11). Environmental justice movements value “story-telling as an epistemology, in addition to more traditional scientific and economic discourses” (Sandler and Pezzullo 11), moving beyond charts and statistics and reports to addressing people's needs, stories, and experiences, an ethic that Maathai amply demonstrates in the stories she deploys in her speeches and writings.



**The Green Belt Movement: Sponsoring Ecological Literacies,
Addressing Linguistic Diversity**

It's just hard for people here to imagine ruling people who don't read; they can't write, so you can't reach them through newspapers. . . . They can't imagine how hard it is to communicate even through the radio, where you don't have a lingua franca in one country. (Maathai; qtd. in Tucker)

Maathai's story of the subsistence farmer from Yaounde serves as a reminder that development policies are often made "for" and not "with" the very people being affected by them. However, the GBM has been all about making development decisions "with" the women directly affected, valuing their narratives, knowledges, and literacies, and empowering them to pursue sustainable development. A key piece of the GBM has been sponsoring ecological literacies among women who may or may not be formally educated or print literate and, as a result, are even less likely to have scientific training. The tree nursery partners that the GBM initially sought were part of the government forestry department; the Kenyan Conservator of Forests did not believe the Green Belt Movement's initial goal of planting 15 million trees was achievable and laughed when Maathai told him of it, pledging all the seedlings they needed, which he later retracted when he couldn't keep up with the demand, as noted in *The Green Belt Movement* (Maathai 25). As the project expanded, so did the need for participants to learn the skill of maintaining their own tree nurseries so they could keep up with the demand and not depend on outside parties. A key challenge that women faced in establishing nurseries was technical literacy. When government foresters insisted on teaching seminars on establishing tree nurseries based on technical language, many women did not understand the technical information. Gradually, the women decided to take leadership of the project and learning into their own hands (27). They had cultivated crops for years, so the GBM reoriented their forestry education and training to make use of their knowledge and skills in cultivation; they learned to "look for seeds in their neighborhoods, propagate trees that met their basic needs, replenish indigenous trees and protect the local biodiversity" (28). Thus,

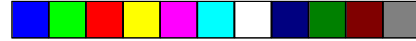


these women became “foresters without diplomas” (28), and they helped each other acquire information and instruct one another.

In addition to the problem of technical knowledge and disciplinary specialization, one formidable challenge faced by any organization in Kenya and in many parts of Africa is the language barrier. Maathai “estimates that in Kenya 40 percent of the population can understand English and Swahili, the primary languages of parliament” (Tucker). Communicating, organizing, and working across linguistic diversity therefore is challenging. During the colonial period in Kenya and beyond, native languages were often suppressed or discouraged through the educational system and the church. Maathai tells in her memoir *Unbowed* of an incident at her Catholic boarding school, St. Cecilia in Kenya, where the girls who were caught speaking their native language and had to wear a “button known as a ‘monitor,’” “sometimes inscribed with phrases in English such as ‘I am stupid, I was caught speaking my mother tongue’” (59). Not only was linguistic shaming practiced, but also physical labor was used as punishment. For example, students were made to do chores around the school to pay for the infraction of speaking their home languages (59).

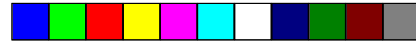
One particularly telling incident at Maathai’s school was when one of the Kikuyu students wrote a letter to a friend that contained a literal translation of a Kikuyu saying. The student wrote: “Here in St. Cecilia’s we are fine, still eating fire.” (58). A nun who intercepted the letter before it was sent was “appalled and angry” (58), telling her fellow nuns that the student had accused them of feeding her fire. The girl who had written the letter went to dinner that night and found charcoal on her plate. She was told to eat it since the school officials were supposedly feeding her fire. What the nuns did not understand is that the expression, “still eating fire,” is a Kikuyu saying that means “we’re having a great time” (49). Maathai and her classmates could barely suppress their laughter during dinner.

Linguistic monitoring proved effective, and Maathai and her classmates began to favor English, as she ruefully admits in *Unbowed*: “Even when we went home or met children from school in the village we tended to speak English” (60). The result for many students was a loss of language and heritage; in fact, monitors are still used in many Kenyan



schools to reinforce the use of English (6). For Maathai, though, her connection to her home language was stronger than this linguistic suppression, and she continued to speak Kikuyu (60). However, she notes that tactics such as English-only, punishment-driven linguistic policies in Kenyan schools reinforce the idea that home languages are “inferior and insignificant”; she acknowledges that “cultural knowledge, wisdom, and history” are lost when home languages are suppressed (60). Thus, she emphasizes the connection between cultural diversity, linguistic diversity, and biodiversity, a connection often not made in arguments for sustainability, and a connection that is essential to the success of the Green Belt Movement.

In *The Challenge for Africa*, Maathai addresses the importance of language as “an essential means of binding the micro-nation together” (220). During the colonial period in Africa, the administration would appoint a local African representative to serve as a translator and transmitter. This translator would speak the “micro-nation’s language, as well as the European language of the administration, and interpret between the local people and high-level administrators who were citizens of the colonial power” (220). After the colonial period, governments conducted business in foreign languages that most citizens did not understand, such as English and French, or in the national language of Kiswahili, leading to an increasingly wider gap between the governing class and the citizens (220). Maathai argues that this leads to suppression of civic participation, and she proposes that schooling should be conducted in a youth’s native language until the fourth or eighth grade. Beyond that a child could learn one or two international languages (222–23). She cites South Africa as a good example of an African country that has capitalized on its linguistic diversity by “enshrining in its constitution no fewer than eleven official languages” (222). Maathai has also made sure that the Green Belt Movement has operated in a linguistically inclusive way and that the women taking part are able to speak, interact, and organize in their own languages. If a Green Belt staff member comes into a village to work with local people and does not know the native language, someone from the village or area who knows multiple languages, including the home language, comes along to translate (222). This ensures that tree-planting is taught in the language of the locale.



All too often development discourses have come from Western countries and come in the form of English. As linguist Suzanne Romaine points out, the language of “development” matters, “Use of the local language is inseparable from participatory development” (141). This is especially true in nations where women have less access to educational opportunities and lower functional literacy rates. As noted earlier, by privileging women’s native languages and their practical know-how, Maathai and the GBM value the knowledge and linguistic diversity already present in rural women’s communities and sponsor ecological literacies that sustain women’s livelihoods.

Calling for Transnational Activism

In addition to helping global citizens identify with and value the environmental leadership of rural African women, Maathai has sought to make the problem of climate change one that people of all nations can rhetorically identify with and feel responsible for in their daily lives. After winning the Nobel Peace Prize, she was called upon to speak out on global climate change to international organizations. For instance, in a statement to the United Nations General Assembly on climate change” in 2009, ten weeks before the Copenhagen Summit on climate change, Maathai asked the U.N. to take a key leadership role on climate change. In her speech, she uses the trope of the “wake-up call” to indicate that millions of people across the globe have made a “Global Wake Up Call on climate change, calling on you [U.N. leaders] to provide leadership, act together, act now and act differently” (2). The wake-up call Maathai is referring to took place on September 21, 2009, a global day of action organized by groups and organizations that held flash mobs to urge public leaders to take action on climate change at the Copenhagen Summit. The September Global Wake-Up Call was a joint effort of the Avaaz.org (“avaaz” is the Persian word for voice), an international organization working for change on human rights, climate change, animal rights and other issues, and the TckTckTck Campaign, “an alliance, named for a ‘tck’ing clock on climate change,” as well as other organizations and individuals around the world. The Global Wake-up call campaign urged a fair global climate



treaty. Interested parties were asked to register events in their locales and pick a public place accessible to many people (“September”).

In Maathai’s speech, there is a strong sense of *kairos*, of space, time, and the cultural moment of climate change (Crowley and Hawhee 37). As Wendy Hesford argues, “[t]o analyze why an issue or identification is persuasive or has a sense of urgency at a particular historical moment and context is to examine its *kairos*” (147).

In acknowledging the *kairotic* moment of the U.N. speech, only ten weeks before Copenhagen, Maathai acknowledges that this moment has brought a sense of urgency and identification, a moment of citizens of the world mobilizing around global climate change. She speaks for a common “we” in her speech: “We, the Peoples of the World, the people you lead, are here to encourage you and support you to secure a fair, ambitious and binding deal” (3). She notes that “we” must “connect the dots” and practice a rhetoric of connectivity (see Grewal) that allows us to understand and connect local natural disasters with global climate change patterns—from “erratic fires in California, devastating floods in Bangladesh, and West Africa or melting polar ice, the negative impacts of climate change are already here” (2). Yet, she also localizes the issue in her home country of Kenya where she notes that

ten million people are starving. Their crops are failing, their children are hungry, their fields are parched and their cattle are dying. Why? Because besides decades of environmental neglect and mismanagement, that made communities vulnerable, now we also have climate change. (2)

Maathai reminds the U.N. Assembly that we cannot deny climate change and calls upon them to exercise “collective political will” and take action in Copenhagen, including the establishment of an “institutional mechanism, a geographical information system, and equitable governance structures to channel resources efficiently and to ensure transparency and accountability” (2). She notes that the U.N. stakeholders actually “have the power to turn this [situation] around in Copenhagen,” thus indicating the agency and influence the U.N. possesses; however, Maathai appeals to the U.N. assembly as more than a leadership body. She also makes an ethical appeal to U.N. leaders, referring to them as family members who

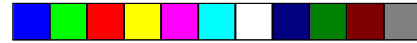


must be concerned with the legacy they are leaving for their loved ones: “Before being leaders, you are someone’s mother, father, sister or brother. We appeal to you, our leaders, to personally go to Copenhagen, and for the almost seven billion people on Earth, seal a fair deal” (3). She also reminds U.N. leaders that we can’t dodge out of the problem due to nationality or location in the economic hierarchy: “No part of the world is immune. We are all in this together irrespective of our level of contribution to the problem. Business-as-Usual for any one would be a tragedy” (3). In creating a sense of urgency, Maathai exhibits a dynamic practice of kairotic identification by which she presents “identification and identity claims as dynamic moments of action that are at once rhetorical and material, individual and social, local and global” (Hesford 163).

At the same time, as Maathai appealed to U.N. leaders to address climate change at the Copenhagen Summit, she and the GBM have continued to speak out about climate change as a matter of global environmental justice, with industrialized nations needing to take an ethical stance on the issue and be responsible for how developed nations’ consumption creates destruction for economically developing nations. In fact, the GBM has urged developed nations using the most energy to provide “a comprehensive compensation package” for “the developing countries whose total historical emissions are very low and are the most affected” (“Climate”). So while the GBM takes responsibility for combating climate change in Kenya and Africa, it also urges industrialized nation-states to take responsibility for the way their energy use is affecting the whole world even as they change their energy use to more sustainable sources.

Rhetorical Diffusion and Reframing: Tree-planting as Sustainable Development Strategy, Settlement Strategy, and Carbon Offset Strategy

As the Green Belt Movement’s influence has spread globally, the organization’s main rhetorics, principles, and tactics have been “dif-fused” across various sites and organizations, as the U.N. speech shows.



As noted earlier, “diffusion” is one of the “oldest forms “of transnational contention,” and it takes place when “challengers in one country or region adopt or adapt the organization frames, collective actions, or targets of those in other countries and regions” (della Porta and Tarrow 3). For instance, the Civil Rights era “sit-in” as a collective action and strategy has been widely adopted and diffused in Western Europe. Another example is the “shanty-town” protests from the 1980s, where U.S. college students built and occupied makeshift structures to signify their solidarity with the apartheid-era South African black townships and to convince university administrators to divest university funds from South African companies (3). This “shanty-town” or encampment strategy has been used most recently by the Occupy Wall Street Movement where members occupied tent cities or makeshift structures.

Tree-planting, like the sit-in and the shanty-town, is a symbolic and material strategy, but it is also a strategy for sustainable development. As Francesca de Gasparis, the European Director of the Green Belt Movement, notes, treeplanting provides citizens with a hands-on, concrete strategy to address climate change: it is something that ordinary citizens can do without a great deal of specialized training, a direct and concrete action. Whereas the science of climate change is complex and overwhelming to the layperson, tree-planting is the opposite. It is viewed by many as relatively easy to understand and implement in most cases. Also, as noted earlier, a tree becomes a rhetorical symbol for possibility, growth, and change. As a result, the GBM’s tree-planting program has become one particular way that environmental activists have reached across the divide of class, caste, education, and nation to urge citizens on the ground to take a concrete action toward mitigating climate change.

However, organizations and groups have taken up treeplanting with very different rhetorical motivations and environmental results. As geographer Shaul Cohen argues: “Trees have long been invested with positive symbols and associations; they are powerful mechanisms for carrying out different agendas because their meanings and uses can be manipulated and directed to a variety of ends” (17). As the concept of tree-planting diffuses and travels from one context to another, it is adapted for different purposes and achieves different effects. As Rebecca Dingo



argues in *Networking Arguments*, one way for rhetoricians to address how rhetorical concepts are diffused through networks is to address how they take on different arguments and are “reframed” for particular rhetorical purposes as they travel from one context to another. She warns against rhetoricians studying rhetorical concepts or strategies through only a single event or occasion without considering the larger history and circulation of a particular concept. She argues that we must study rhetorical concepts as they travel, are circulated, reframed, and remade for different purposes, organizations, and contexts (see also Trimbur). And as rhetorics travel across contexts and borders, they are connected to the material conditions of their circulation (Dingo 6–7).

Historically, tree-planting as a sustainability concept has traveled across the borders of the nation-state and also across time. I do not have the time or space here to narrate the complex historical framing and reframing of treeplanting as a rhetorical strategy and sustainability concept; however, I briefly sketch the contours and mixed success of that concept in the U.S. as a form of civic development and as a carbon offset strategy.

Tree-planting as Civic Development and as a Carbon Offset Strategy

Tree-planting was advocated as a “settlement” strategy as part of the U.S. Timber Culture Act of 1873 (repealed in 1891), which allowed for the planting of trees on prairie homestead claims with mixed success (“Timber”). Settlers were to plant 40 acres (reduced to 10 acres later) of trees on prairie homesteads and keep them alive for eight years (“Timber”). After eight years of successful cultivation, they would be granted the land. As many settler diaries and accounts of tree claims attest, they were notoriously difficult to “prove up” and were subject to abuses and falsification. In addition, “planting and cultivation of trees were sometimes done in such a haphazard way that there was little or no chance that the trees would grow to maturity (“Timber”).

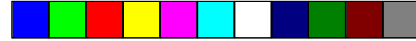
In spite of its mixed success in the plains states, tree-planting seized the imagination of U.S. citizens and proved to be so popular that Western civic leaders heartily embraced the holiday of Arbor Day, a national day



of tree-planting, beautification, and civic improvement established in 1872 by Julius Sterling Morton. Morton was an agriculturist, Nebraska journalist (originally hailing from the forested state of Michigan), and politician who encouraged tree-planting as a mode of agricultural and civic improvement in the West (“Timber”). Tree-planting was thus associated with “settling” and improving the arid regions of the West. One effect of this settlement and beautification rhetoric of tree-planting is that it was part of a larger process that involved displacing Native Americans from their native lands to make way for white farmers. This rhetoric contrasts sharply with the rhetoric of the GBM, which is all about sustaining people on their land.

The association between tree-planting, civic beautification, and agricultural development persists to this day in the U.S. and across the globe. The Arbor Day Foundation was set up in the U.S. in 1972 in commemoration of the original Arbor Day in 1872 (“Arbor Day Foundation”) and has a presence in other nations. The contemporary Arbor Day Foundation has continued its focus on civic improvement and beautification with the Tree City U.S.A. initiative, but has also shifted emphasis with the times and has moved into climate change initiatives as well. This rhetoric of civic beautification and improvement is very much present in current manifestations of rituals, such as Earth Day tree-plantings, and civic organization and school projects that involve tree-planting, often used to mark symbolic moments of public memory, with trees that are planted as memorials and ritual markers (see Cohen).

Given the compelling symbolic and civic beautification rationale behind tree-planting that was birthed through the Timber Culture Act and also the arguments about combatting REDD that we gain through the Green Belt Movement’s rhetoric, it is perhaps no surprise to see corporations pursuing tree-planting as a carbon management strategy to counteract and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. One well-known North American example: Royal Dutch Shell in Canada pledged to plant trees to offset 50% of the greenhouse gases it would be emitting through the development of the Athabasca Oil Sands Project in Alberta. According to a 2008 press release from Shell, the company provided \$2 million in funding and planted “100,000 trees annually across Canada, from BC’s Lower Mainland to Quebec City” (“Shell”).



Given this move toward tree-planting by oil companies (and Shell is not alone in this), we have to ask ourselves what it means to plant trees to offset oil sands acquisition when producing crude oil from “oil sands mining results in greenhouse gas emissions in the range of 62 to 164 kilograms of CO² equivalent per barrel” (Dyer). That does not even include what happens to the land where oil sands’ mining happens—destruction of old growth forests, wetlands, and environmental effects from mining to the people and wildlife nearby. Thus, “oil sands production and upgrading are estimated to be 3.2 to 4.5 times as intensive per barrel as conventional crude produced in North America” (Dyer). In addition, when tree plantations are established in vulnerable regions of the world to capture and sequester corporate carbon emissions, they can take land away from local peoples, use disproportionate amounts of water needed for other vital uses, and perpetuate non-native, fast growing tree species like pine and eucalyptus that can actually deplete the soil and diminish biodiversity (Randerson).

As a study from Belgian researchers Luyssaert et al in *Nature* magazine points out, new forests are also not as efficient as old growth forests in sequestering carbon. In fact, newly planted trees and forests can end up emitting carbon due to the disturbance of soils and ecosystems (213–15). Thus, it would actually be more environmentally sound for those who desire carbon offsets (like Shell Canada) to invest in lobbying for international treaties to protect old growth forests. So the environmental sustainability rhetoric of tree-planting is transformed as it becomes a quick-fix carbon management strategy that can cause more problems than it solves. Indeed, the true danger is not just limited to the problems that can be wrought by tree-planting projects to “offset” carbon emissions, but with the very move to use tree-planting as a “band-aid” solution that is meant to fix poor environmental policy-making and regulation (Cohen 37).

What sets the GBM’s strategy of treeplanting apart from carbon offset tree-planting strategies, however, is the way that the NGO ensures that African women are empowered as environmental leaders responsible for their communities’ futures. However, this work has been hard won, and Maathai and GBM supporters have experienced great resistance and backlash to their work on behalf of African women.



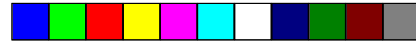
**Conclusion:
Fighting for Biodiversity and Fighting for Women's Rights**

Fighting battles with women can be very difficult and sad, because the society and the women themselves often make it appear that most women are happy with the little they have and have no intention of fighting for their rights. I am often confronted by women who have waited until that security called “man” is no longer available to them to remember that they should have protected their rights, irrespective of the men in their lives.

—Wangari Maathai

What makes Maathai's achievements with the GBM all the more notable are all the ways the Kenyan government has, over the years, actively attacked her and jailed her and other GBM supporters for their activism. Since Maathai founded a movement that defied and continues to defy gender barriers, that challenged the Kenyan government and cultural logics of technical education and expertise, it is perhaps no surprise that she would face resistance and backlash in her own nation. In *Unbowed* and a variety of interviews, Maathai narrates the different ways that gender and ethnicity became a barrier to the work she wanted to do (101).¹ Even with a doctorate and an NGO to her credit, Maathai had to fight to be recognized professionally, waging collective battles in her workplace for improved compensation and working conditions for female university employees (116–17).

As Maathai struggled in the workplace against gender and ethnic injustice, her husband sought a very public divorce, telling the press that she was “too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn, and too hard to control” (*Unbowed* 146), thus subjecting Maathai and their three children to public ridicule and gender-based harassment. In addition to Maathai facing public harassment from her ex-husband, she and other women active in the GBM were repeatedly harassed by the Kenyan government when President Moi was in power; Maathai and others were beaten and jailed, much of the harassment fueled by gender violence and ethnic hatred; in fact, Moi was known for targeting Kikuyus like Maathai. In 1989, when Moi was going to demolish Uhuru Park in Nairobi to build



a skyscraper, Maathai and other women were able to stop it by staging protests (Tucker). In 1992, Maathai “was beaten into a coma during another protest, this time over political prisoners. Police beatings stopped that day only when elderly female protesters began stripping naked, thus shaming their younger male assailants. Maathai and her followers won again—and yet it was another decade before Moi would be voted out of office” (Tucker). In fact, Maathai was subject to an Amnesty International letter-writing campaign that was partially responsible for her being freed from jail.

Even after being elected to parliament and moving to the center of governmental power, Maathai continued to fight battles for women to be treated equally, protesting a rule that would not allow women parliamentarians to take their handbags filled with essential items like their cell phones and keys into the parliament chambers (MacDonald). Even in the center of power, Maathai had to fight locally and globally for equal treatment for women and continued to do so throughout her life, practicing what Elizabeth Flynn, Patricia Soritirin, and Ann Brady would call a feminist rhetoric of resilience, which “is about recognizing and seizing opportunities even in the most oppressive situations” (8). Maathai has continually exercised imagination and rhetorical resilience at a time when Africa and, by extension, African women are often portrayed in the Western media as being in crisis and in need of Western aid (see Dingo’s critique of *Half the Sky* in this issue). Maathai flips the script on this narrative of “needy” Africans and African women, showing that environmental problems like deforestation and desertification can be addressed if the root causes are understood and if grassroots activists seek their own solutions and sponsor ecological literacies that allow for deep structures of sustainable development and change.

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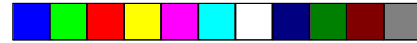
Notes

1. After completing five and a half years of education and two degrees in the U.S. Maathai came back with an official written job offer at the University of Nairobi as an assistant to the Professor of Zoology; however, when she returned

to Kenya from the U.S. to start the job, the professor who had authorized her hiring said the offer letter was not official and dismissed her. Maathai later learned he had offered the job to someone in his own ethnic community (101).

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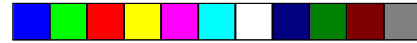
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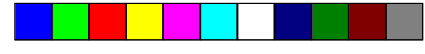
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