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# Please Don't Waste Me: Majora Carter's 'Greening the Ghetto' TED Talk

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**PLEASE DON'T WASTE ME:  
MAJORA CARTER'S "GREENING THE GHETTO" TED TALK**

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Abstract: A speech by Bronx activist Majora Carter at the 2006 TED Talks event was reposted on the web and has since been embedded on blogs and sites around the web, garnering significant positive reaction. This paper comprises a case study of the text of the speech, its immediate delivery at the TED conference (as captured by videocameras at the event), and the way the message has been re-mediated by bloggers and web commentators in the years since. The paper examines the talk and its subsequent circulation both as an instance of environmental justice rhetoric, with its tropes of community and embodied experience, and as an exemplar of the way orality and human bodies in peril retain rhetorical force in an increasingly mediated environment.

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**Introduction**

In February 2006, Bronx activist Majora Carter delivered an 18-minute address to the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference in Long Beach, California. The speech, "Greening the Ghetto" ([http://www.ted.com/talks/majora\\_carter\\_s\\_tale\\_of\\_urban\\_renewal.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/majora_carter_s_tale_of_urban_renewal.html)) described efforts to reverse decades of environmental racism and to empower residents to take control of their destiny in economically and environmentally sustainable ways. When TED organizers began to place recordings of conference addresses on the Web later that year, Carter's was selected as part of the first group to be so displayed. A clip from the speech appears in a title montage that plays at the beginning of every talk available on the site. The often emotional presentation was well received by conference attendees and has since generated considerable attention on the Web.

Carter's environmental-justice address is framed within a collection of current-events and bleeding-edge "TED Talks," and is easily accessed and experienced—again or anew—by a wide audience. Visitor comments suggest that the speech is experienced as a present-day event rather than an historical record. Furthermore, the manner of publication allows visitors to "take a copy with them" and embed the video—and in a sense, Carter herself—on their weblog or personal website, as many have done.

In this paper I argue that the address generates its enthusiastic and often emotional response because it creates a liminal space of dynamic movement between ghetto and elite, self and Other, materiality and subjectivity that allows her audience to participate directly, to experience with her the harms caused by environmental justice, in part because she herself embodies her message. I also argue that the circulation of her address as an embeddable Web object affords new ways for audiences to participate in a message and convey it to others.

I begin with an examination of environmental justice, orality, visual imagery, and

embodiment. I then provide historical information on the TED Conference and a biographical sketch of Majora Carter. The paper then turns to a detailed analysis of the address, looking not only at her words, but her visual presentation and the way in which the address has been archived and disseminated, and concludes with a discussion of implications and possible future research.

### **Environmental Justice: Environmentalism or Civil Rights?**

Carter explicitly invokes the trope of environmental justice early in her address. Part of a cluster of related concepts, including environmental racism, eco-racism, and ecofeminism, Heinz argues that environmental justice borrows both its tactics of political activism and its imagery from the civil rights struggle (Heinz 50; see also Melosi 43). Čapek further argues that the roots of both are lodged in previous social justice movements, with the themes of individual dignity and full citizenship rising to the foreground in civil rights rhetoric. She notes that “in minority communities, environmental justice is often strongly linked to civil rights issues” providing an explicit connection between the two (Čapek 10). Environmental justice may in fact be a resurgence of a “faltering” civil rights movement (Melosi 47), suggesting that it *is* the civil rights movement, refocused.

Most writers place its emergence somewhere in the late 1970s or early 1980s, when the siting of toxic wastes and polluting industries in minority communities began to receive national attention. A 1987 report from the United Church of Christ's Justice and Witness Ministries (Bullard, et al), with its detailed statistics and strong condemnation of “environmental racism,” is commonly regarded as a milestone. Melosi notes that the report was “the first comprehensive national study of the demographic patterns associated with the location of hazardous waste sites,” and it found that “racial composition of a community was the single variable best able to predict the siting of commercial hazardous-waste facilities” (Melosi 49).

However, the centrality of race (vs. class or other factors) in environmental injustices has been contended. On the one hand, the 2007 update of the UCC report reiterates its 1987 findings and says that, in fact, things are worse “because of government cutbacks in enforcement, weakening

health protection, and dismantling the environmental justice regulatory apparatus” and that “significant racial and socioeconomic disparities persist in the distribution of the nation’s commercial hazardous waste facilities” (Bullard, et al vii-xi). What is difficult to tease out for some, however, are the *relative* roles of race and class in this distribution. Many activists have focused on “environmental racism,” but others in the movement have tended to shy away from this term towards the broader rubric of “environmental justice.” Heinz especially finds the notion of Blackness problematic as it has been used in the “racism” thread of the movement, because she argues that it just as often reinforces negative stereotypes of Black neighborhoods, and essentializes “Blackness” to an extent that can be nearly as oppressive as the dominant hegemonic systems that justice activists are resisting. As she notes, “one must be careful to avoid reinscribing monolithic notions of Blackness at the same time as Blackness is defined as difference by dominant groups in society”; furthermore, “use of Black-White categories unconsciously risks reinscribing Whiteness as the unmarked sign” thus backgrounding and mystifying notions of White entitlement (Heinz 57).

Yet critics have found that environmental justice rhetoric does display features that connect it strongly to the African American community. In fact, the idea of “community” appears frequently, both as a sign of solidarity against oppression and as a symbol of that which is to be preserved. Čapek says this usage “implies a nationwide movement 'community' transcending racial, geographic, and economic barriers and resting on the claim that no community's solution should become another community's problem” (Čapek 10). Heinz finds this community trope an essential component in Black newspapers' call for local action; its usage signals both internal solidarity and the separateness of those powerful external forces—often White and privileged—arrayed against the community. These external forces are typically depicted as threatening and even violently assaulting the community (Heinz 52-54). She also points out that “neighborhood” is further invoked to concretize the community as a particular place, connected with Black identity: “In personalizing and further localizing environmental justice, the neighborhood concept brings environmental justice

from a community, or city, issue to one impacting a particular street” (Heinz 55).

Environmental justice activists speak with authority and authenticity as members of specific communities suffering specific harms. The speaker thus embodies the very social and personal harm that she describes. Blair sees this as an avenue for “considering the material conditions of discourse,” by focusing “on the lived-in body as a condition and consequence of rhetoric,” and by understanding “rhetoric itself as material” (Blair 288). Human bodies living in conditions of environmental harm can thus become rhetorical, as the bodies of Black people, pummeled by streams from fire hoses in Birmingham, illustrated the oppression of segregation, racism, and Jim Crow laws (Blair 272-273). Houck says the very presence of human bodies performed much of the civil rights movement's “eloquence and moral force” and were very effective in swaying public and political opinion (Houck 68-80). Johnson asserts that this possibility was clearly in Martin Luther King's mind when he provoked Bull Connor's extreme reaction in Birmingham; “For King, the best means of making racism visible was by exposing its action on black bodies” (Johnson 20). The total engagement of bodies in rhetoric lends them a powerfully persuasive authenticity.

Television, print, and now Internet technologies extend the impact of body rhetorics. Even mediated images of bodies can have rhetorical force, as Gallagher and Zagacki relate in their study of *Life* magazine photos from the Selma marches. They argue that the photos of marchers “functioned rhetorically to evoke the common humanity of blacks and whites in compelling and profound ways by enabling viewers to recognize—and confront the implications of—themselves, their values, and their habits in the actions and experiences of others” (Gallagher and Zagacki 115). They further assert that images can potentially invoke viewers' moral consciousness by their power to “activate strong emotional responses about people in the particularity of their life circumstances and in specific locales” (Gallagher and Zagacki 129-132).

Carter's address begins as oral performance, recalling the classical origins of rhetoric as well as the affordances of current technologies, such as near-ubiquitous streaming video, in which the

spoken word is effortlessly transmitted (and archived), bypassing written language altogether. Gunn reminds us of the work of Walter Ong and others, who have asserted that oral speech creates immediacy and presence; it precedes the symbolic, in some ways, residing “at the intersection of the human and the divine, a mysterious locality that both inspires and frightens” (Gunn 344-349). It particularizes a living, breathing entity. Its impact emerges from an infant's memory of the undifferentiated parent; the human voice so strongly evokes awareness of another subjectivity that we will even strive to turn nonsense speech sounds into language (Gunn 354-357). Thus, for Gunn, “In our image-saturated environment, speech has taken on a new aura of authenticity” (Gunn 361). The point is especially relevant in light of the technologies that are used to carry Carter’s address to new listeners. This is quite unlike reading the transcript of an address in the newspaper, for example.

Garner and Calloway-Thomas's discussion of African-American orality helps us connect the salient features of the oral modality with environmental-justice rhetoric. In attempting to characterize the nature of a “Black presence” in African-American rhetoric, they found oral culture central. They argue that communication in oral cultures is immediate—literally “unmediated” as well as synchronic—and personally involves the communicators. They also describe orality as a “a rhetoric of everyday use.” Grounded in ethics, critical thinking, and personal logic, it emphasizes judgment and decision-making within an unpredictable arena of live interaction with others (Garner and Calloway-Thomas 47-48). To minimize conflict in this synchronic, unmediated interpersonal contact, it tends toward an indirect and circular quality. At the same time, it accentuates group identity because shared knowledge is required to decipher that indirection, to know when something is serious or playful (Garner and Calloway-Thomas 49-53).

Both phronesis and a sense of community are thus common in oral culture and environmental justice rhetoric. Prior scholarship thus suggests a number of components to expect in a speech like Carter's: community and neighborhood tropes, embodied authenticity, shared

humanity, moral judgment, and indirection. We can also anticipate that the rhetorical work of the address can circulate widely in the modern YouTube world.

Intriguingly, Russell's analysis of so-called “liquid media” suggests additional factors at play. She describes a novel means of experiencing messages that is a product of today's environment of ubiquitous personal publishing and semantic computing, which she characterizes as “a participatory media culture in which creativity has been democratized and each person is his or her own channel.” Russell is talking about visual advertising content, but what she says is also thought-provoking when we consider the many ways Carter's speech might be experienced and consumed:

[C]ontent - as it appears in the context of different devices and locations and is distributed to various individuals - can be adapted for relevance to the consumer's mindset and experience. In a stream of water, each drop loses its unique identity, yet the molecules which comprise the stream retain their identity, even as phase shifts change the form of the stream - to ice or steam (Russell, n.pag.).

Thus the speech can become a dynamic blend of immediate physical presence and technologically portable object that can operate in an almost limitless number of contexts, far transcending the circulation of something like a printed transcript in a Great Speeches collection, or even an oft-repeated TV clip.

### **Technology, Entertainment, and Design**

The first TED conference featured the Macintosh computer and compact discs, and while there is a longstanding tradition of unveiling the latest technological dazzler at TED, the conference's themes encompass the arts, politics, human rights, disabilities, culture, and business—“ideas that matter in any discipline” (TED Conference LLC, “About the Conferences”).

Conference attendees are a who's who of heavyweights: academics, entrepreneurs, scientists, performers; Amy Tan, Jeffrey Katzenberg, Billy Graham, Bill Gates, Al Gore, and many others. Membership costs \$6000 per year; conference organizers have felt obliged to defend themselves from accusations of elitism on the website (TED Conference LLC, “Is TED elitist?”). Put simply,

the conference attracts spectacular presenters because its audience is influential. Presenting at TED exposes both the message and the speaker to an audience that can make things happen.

The conference format is designed to expose attendees to a large number of ideas over a short period, and there are over fifty talks in four days, each limited to 18 minutes, as well as related events such as receptions and opportunities for networking and conversation. Presenters wear portable microphones and speak from a raised stage, with large projection screens behind them. Most TED speakers move about freely on stage without notes, but Carter—though visibly well-prepared and eloquent—relied on notes resting on a lectern

The information and networking opportunities are often transformational for those present. Both attendees and presenters refer to the TED Conference as “life-changing” in the way it cross-pollinates ideas and opens doors (TED Conference LLC, “About the Conferences”). When I asked him why Carter responded to the TED invitation, James Chase of the Majora Carter Consulting Group was almost incredulous. “The audience is one of the most influential in the world,” he wrote. “Why would anyone in Majora's position not want to address them?” (Chase).

### **Majora Carter, Reluctant Recruit**

Born in 1966, Majora Carter grew up and went to school in the South Bronx during a time of rising crime and urban decay. As a child she saw neighboring apartments burn down without police or fire-department responses, and her older brother was murdered there after surviving two tours in Vietnam. These facts of her childhood are repeated in nearly every biographical sketch that appears. They are pivotal in her life and, clearly, a source of rhetorical authenticity.

She escaped the neighborhood—in her case, through college education—but found herself returning to attend graduate school (Carter, “This Is Home”), earning her MFA from NYU in 1997 (Wikipedia Contributors). During that period she found herself—reluctantly at first, but with growing enthusiasm—paying more attention to the community around her instead of looking for ways to escape it.

She ran unsuccessfully for City Council in 2001. That same year, after “successfully shifting the Giuliani administration's plans from more municipal waste handling to positive economic development,” Carter founded the nonprofit Sustainable South Bronx (SSBx) initiative, an “environmental justice solutions corporation.” The group landed several large Federal grants and created “the first new South Bronx water front park in over 60 years,” used urban reforestation methods to create a “robust horticultural infrastructure” for both physical and psychic benefits to Bronx residents, and developed green stewardship and job-training programs designed to benefit those on public assistance and to empower citizens to “resist bad environmental decisions” (Majora Carter Group). Much of this history is recounted in her TED talk, accompanied by photographs and graphics on the screen behind her.

Carter has continued to build an impressive resume of experience and recognition in the years since 2006:

Majora Carter is a 2006 MacArthur “genius” Fellow, one of Essence Magazine’s 25 most influential African-Americans, one the NY Post's 50 Most Influential Women for the past 2 years, co-host of the Green on the Sundance Channel, a board member of the Wilderness Society, and host of a special national public radio series called “The Promised Land” ([thepromisedland.org](http://thepromisedland.org)). She is currently president of the green-collar economic consulting company, The Majora Carter Group, LLC (Majora Carter Group).

She remains active on the speaking circuit and her consulting company's website suggests a number of ventures for the future. The spike in attention caused by the TED address and its subsequent online circulation made Carter a highly visible and sought-after speaker, but Chase says this was unanticipated. “We did not know the [TED Talks] site would be so successful and thought of the event as a chance to leverage connections in the room, not outside of it.” He adds, “We regularly get effusive emails from people inspired by that talk, and it has led to many requests at substantially increased speaking fees” (Chase). As will be seen, audience reactions indicate that both Carter and her message benefit from this circulation.

### **The Verbal Message**

Carter opens with a note of appreciation to her audience and an immediate statement of her theme: while sustainable development is necessary to survival, it is often resisted as politically and economically impractical. She then concretizes and humanizes the issue—as she will do repeatedly—with an anecdote about a personal discovery that led to the community's initial successes in resisting further pollution and establishing a riverfront park. She credits the discovery to her dog, who becomes a synecdoche, both for the ghetto itself and for the way Carter's activist involvement grew into something larger than she expected.

Carter then lists the health and financial impacts of environmental injustice, ticking these off on her fingers in the video. The problems, she says, impact Blacks as well as all of society. They are a litany familiar to environmental-justice activists: toxic wastes, health threats, urban blight, and inequality.

She personalizes this by recounting her experiences of burning buildings and, in a wrenching passage, the death of a beloved brother. She describes herself as both like her audience and unlike them, highlighting both common humanity and a deeply embedded Otherness. This is the core of her rhetorical strategy of foregrounding her own body, her own humanity:

So what else do we have in common? Well, first of all, we're all incredibly good-looking [laughter] — graduated high school, college, post-graduate degrees, traveled to interesting places, didn't have kids in your early teens, financially stable, never been imprisoned. OK. Good. [laughter]

But, besides being a black woman, I am different from most of you in some other ways. I watched nearly half of the buildings in my neighborhood burn down. My big brother Lenny fought in Vietnam, only to be gunned down a few blocks from our home. [pause — crying], Jesus. I grew up with a crack house across the street. [pause]

Yeah [raises hand] — I'm a poor black child from the ghetto. These things make me different from you. But the things we have in common set me apart from most of the people in my community, and I am in between these two worlds, with enough of my heart to fight for justice in the other.

She then describes the origin of this disparity in a history of urban decay in the South Bronx, leading to apathy and lack of concern for the neighborhood (“If you are told from your earliest days

that nothing good is going to come from your community, that it is bad and ugly, how could it not reflect on you?”). She also finds the origin of apathy in the neighborhood's subjugation by the overwhelming political influence of the rest of the city.

This lack of agency is reversed when residents decided to take control of their destiny, Carter says, and from this point forward in the address she and the Bronx are active change agents, rather than victims of injustice. The middle of the speech details successful campaigns in which Carter has been directly involved, including a green-jobs training program and the installation of several “cool roofs” and green roofs.

She then injects a lighthearted note about the butterflies attracted to the gardens—described with childlike excitement as “our little friends—so cool!” She also playfully violates TED rules about not asking for financial support. Again and again, Carter is injecting herself into the message, for she is the Bronx, the complete human beings that the audience must begin to recognize in environmental planning. The humor and lightness are never allowed to be completely frivolous; as she does repeatedly, Carter immediately shifts emotional gears with a topical reference to the destruction of Black neighborhoods in New Orleans in the wake of hurricane Katrina; she thus uses a familiar image of the devastated Lower Ninth Ward as an analogy for the impoverished South Bronx, articulating both as of calamities exacerbated by racism.

As she addresses counterarguments her negative emotions become more apparent; she comes close to open sarcasm when she claims to recognize that solutions won't be pursued simply because they are right or moral:

Now, listen — I do not expect individuals, corporations or government to make the world a better place because it is right or moral. This presentation today only represents some of what I've been through. Like a tiny little bit. You've no clue. But I'll tell you later if you want to know.

Nonetheless, she says, “I have embraced my inner capitalist” and knows the power of bottom lines. She turns this in her favor by redefinition, arguing for a “triple bottom line” that recognizes

community, government, and business interests, and thereby helps avoid waste and “hyper exploitation” by corporate interests. She is opening up a space of operation for the enlightened capitalist—likely in her immediate audience—who might want to invest towards a potentially non-exploitative profit.

She then visualizes the possibilities by describing successful efforts in Bogota, Colombia, implying that both Katrina and the South Bronx are, in effect, part of the third world. She challenges the United States, with its first-world resources, to take similar action—because “We have no excuse in this country. I'm sorry.” She begins her closing with a direct appeal to the audience to become more involved, to talk about sustainability, and include more stakeholders in policymaking:

You, however, are blessed with the gift of influence. That's why you're here, and why you value the information we exchange. Use your influence in support of comprehensive sustainable change everywhere. Don't just talk about it at TED. This is a nationwide policy agenda I'm trying to build, and as you all know, politics are personal. Help me make green the new black. Help me make sustainability sexy.

At this point there is a powerful and seemingly unscripted moment. She appears to depart from her planned talk (“Oh good, glad I have a little more time!”) and moderates what has been a rapid-fire delivery—slowing down, even pausing for several seconds, maintaining eye contact with her audience. This maximizes the significance of her seemingly mild rebuke of audience member Al Gore—a direct assault on white, male, traditional environmentalism and on government inattention to minority stakeholders:

I don't think he understood that I wasn't asking for funding. I was making him an offer. [long pause while Carter looks significantly around the room; applause begins as audience “gets it”]

What troubled me was that this top-down approach is still around.

Now don't get me wrong, we need money. [laughter]

The humor cleverly defuses this potentially tense David-and-Goliath moment; if handled differently it might have risked the connection she has built up through the address. She needs this connection, as she indicates once again by placing herself squarely in the middle, with a peroration that clearly

situates her as messenger and as embodiment of the “environmental justice community”:

I have come from so far to meet you like this. Please don't waste me. By working together, we can become one of those small, rapidly growing groups of individuals who actually have the audacity and courage to believe that we actually can change the world.

We might have come to this conference from very, very different stations in life, but believe me, we all share one incredibly powerful thing — we have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Overall, the verbal transcript demonstrates a strong first-person presence. There are nearly one hundred occurrences of *I*, *me*, *my*, and *mine*, reinforcing Carter's authenticity and embodiment. She is evidence and messenger. She also connects herself with the audience with liberal use of first-person plurals, and her usage blurs the South Bronx and the elite audience. *We*, *us*, and *our* appear almost seventy times, twice as often as *you* and *your*. The environmental-justice theme of community helps intensify the connection between speaker, audience, and the ghetto. Words like *community* and *neighborhood* are common, as are *home*, *people* and *residents*.

The trope of *waste* is also notable because it bridges the past and future. At first, it is a noun, the sludges and garbage inflicted on the Bronx community. In the latter half of the address, though, it is a verb, a shameful act to be refrained from. It transforms from product to process, from history to ongoing enactment, from object to actor. This use of waste mirrors the shift to active agency that occurs in the speech, and nicely dovetails with the economic language described below.

She also verbally establishes her authenticity within the technocentric and economic worlds of environmental science and business. She uses policy-wonk terms like *sustainable development*, *agenda*, *urban areas*, and *decision-making powers*. She describes the green-roof concept with a technophile's zeal that must resonate with the TED audience. She speaks of capitalism and bottom lines. Through this she shows her pragmatism and concretizes her “foot in both worlds” imagery by showing her audience that, on this level, she is one of them.

### **The Audiovisual Majora Carter**

The video clip is shot from several angles and allows the viewer to experience gestures, appearance, visual aids, and setting. Carter appears in jeans and a closefitting black “Greening the Ghetto” t-shirt; viewers are clearly aware that hers is a physically fit human body (one website comment describes her as “buff”). She refers to jogging early in the speech. Her body speaks of health and energetic involvement: the active, agentic Bronx that has taken up its own destiny.

This is reinforced by a sense of restrained, positive energy that emerges from her rapid speaking rate. She begins the address with hands clasped behind her back (looking not unlike a soldier at parade rest), but this evolves into more expansive hand gestures, and she moves around restlessly. At points she rolls her eyes dramatically, as if sharing a reaction with friends, and when she laughs her smile is infectious and open. Her bearing is a dance of exuberance restrained only by the gravity of environmental injustice and a youth's imperfect deferral towards her elite audience.

The knowing looks she gives her audience while describing injustices seem designed to elicit the sense of shared community that Thurmon and Calloway-Thomas describe as central to Black orality. Carter is invoking a connection that heightens empathy and the immediacy of her present body.

Two camera angles, including a wide shot that includes the audience, suggest the immediate auditors' experience and convey the nature of the elite audience. They also allow the viewer to see her slides, which are maps, aerial photos, artists' renderings of urban-renewal project outcomes, and stock photos of children and trash dumps. An animated slide at the beginning, with bold yellow arrows emerging to point at the South Bronx in an aerial photograph, perfectly illustrates the environmental justice trope of the community under attack from outside forces. Two additional camera angles are at left and right profile, giving a more intimate perspective of Carter's physical presence than would have been available to the live audience. In several segments, one sees only her slides. (The scope of this paper doesn't permit closer investigation of the potential meaning of the various angles and the ways in which the video producer has taken part in constructing the

message Carter's wider audience receives.)

### **Majora Carter, Embeddable Web Object**

As has been noted, Carter's address “floats free” of the TED website and can be embedded in all manner of web logs and downloaded to personal computers, iPods, and telephones. Treated as a rhetorical event, Carter's address thus has a wider frame, one that was not present at the time of its original delivery but which is very much a part of the context in which, arguably, her largest audience has experienced the speech.

After being posted on the TED Talks website in 2006, the speech became accessible to a worldwide audience who could visit the site and play back a professionally-produced fullscreen video. And access it they did: comments on the website and embeds in web logs bear witness to the fact that the mediated address lives on and continues to be experienced—for the first time—by new audiences.

The physical context of the speech thus grows from the immediate cultural and physical setting of the 2006 address to include TED website, with its hyperlinks to a biography, Carter's own homepage, and additional resources. The video plays within a page layout template (Figure 1) that clearly connects it with the TED Talks series, lending authority and credibility.

The TED frame may also introduce a limiting and leveling generic quality, because it explicitly establishes Carter's address as one of many talks available for consumption. The viewer would be hard-pressed to miss the YouTube-like “What to watch next” box and other connections. TED Talks cover all manner of “ideas worth spreading,” from new computer touch-screens, to an athlete's triumph over adversity, to the ways an octopus can blend into its environment. The website lists dozens of themes and hundreds of speakers, sortable by a dozen criteria: newest, most emailed, rated jaw-dropping or courageous or inspiring or funny, and other categories. Conceivably this positions Carter's message as a mere selection on a smörgåsbord of ideas, a collection that is arguably open to the same critique of elitism that environmental justice activists work to sustain.

Placement on the TED site is thus a mixed blessing, bringing the message to a wider audience while situating it as a kind of television program, rather than a call to action.

Even this web frame is not fixed, however. TED makes its videos freely distributable via Creative Commons licensing, and common weblog techniques enable it to be embedded in any web page, either directly from TED or via the copy posted to YouTube. The video has been embedded in all manner of websites, including generic video sites like YouTube and Google Video, environmental sites like Grist, and personal weblogs. In both the TED frame and these other settings, viewers have been able to leave comments about the speech.

### **Circulation and Reactions**

Carter's address was filmed in February 2006 and placed on the website four months later. Since then over 100 overwhelmingly positive comments have been added by site visitors, as recently as January 2011 (as of this writing in February 2011; analysis of comments took place in 2009). In early 2007, a copy was uploaded to YouTube, where statistics show it has been accessed over 40,000 times. A Google search finds thousands of hits for the speech title and/or the keywords "Majora Carter" plus "TED Talk." A great many of these sites contain an embedded copy of the video that users can watch within the frame of the referring page, and all contain a hyperlink to the TED page. The TED page contains by far the lion's share of comments; most other pages sampled contained from one to ten visitor responses. Comments attest to the emotional force and authenticity of Carter's message.

The most common theme is the "passionate" nature of the speech and its effect on listeners. *Passion* or *passionate* appear frequently, as do the words *inspiring*, *inspired*, or *inspiration*. Carter and her speech are *amazing*, *great*, *brilliant*, and *incredible*. She is *dynamite*, a *powerhouse*, a *master speaker*. Phrases like *magnificent performance* and *forceful speaker* appear again and again.

Some report getting *tingly*, *goosebumps*, *choked up*, *shed(ding) a tear*, or otherwise experiencing powerful, embodied emotions:

*She had me sobbing at some points.*

*I'm sitting at my desk at work, earplugs inserted, and tears running down my face. A colleague rushes over, wanting to know if I'm alright. Am I alright? I don't know. . . . I'm crying right along with her.*

Others suggest the natural persuasiveness of her message and question the good sense of anyone who would not be moved by it:

*if you do nothing else today, listen to Majora's talk.*

*most definitely worth a listen.*

*highly recommend watching*

*share with friends and colleagues*

*required viewing*

*If this doesn't get you in your gut, you've got serious problems*

*If you are not moved by her talk, you need to check your pulse because you don't have a heartbeat.*

*Enough said .... [the only commentary on one site that embedded the video]*

Her *authenticity* is directly mentioned several times, typically from the standpoint of a respondent with similar credentials: *coming from the south Bronx myself, I truly understand what she is talking about or being a Jamaican, I know what it means to live in a ghetto.*

This sequence of comments from the TED site nicely captures two important threads:

*This is probably one of the most important talks at TED ever in the past or future. wow. very inspiring.*

*my new hero. absolutely. what a powerfully beautiful human.*

*Majora clearly LIVES and BREATHEs this idea.*

*Majora, you are not wasted! ROCK ON... Thank you for sharing your passion and love for the environment and your community with all of us!*

*This is the most impactfully IMPORTANT presentation the TED community will EVER witness!...ever!*

Note the first and last comment that frame the speech as an exemplar of the TED series, which is a

common theme in the TED page's comments, whereas elsewhere it is considered to exemplify environmental-justice rhetoric. This suggests the kind of leveling mentioned earlier as a possible downside of the TED frame. Conversely, note also the way commenters address Carter directly, as if she is immediately present or will at least read “her” website. These respondents are clearly feeling a direct engagement with Carter, rather than simply experiencing a recording.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Majora Carter's address can be judged a success. As James Chase says, it led to wider recognition and “substantially increased speaking fees” (Chase). It can also be termed a success because of its early selection for the TED site, incorporation into the title montage there, and subsequent wide distribution on the web, generating enthusiastic viewer reactions.

As the literature leads one to expect, Carter's physical presence on the stage embodies both the problem and solution she describes. As a representative of the community and neighborhood addressing the TED Talks audience (as she says, “Yeah—I'm a poor black child from the ghetto”), Majora Carter's very body is part of her rhetoric. She is speaking about environmental justice, but she also presents herself as a victim of environmental *in*justice. At one point she is visibly moved to tears and has to stop speaking to regain composure; her voice is hoarse and trembling when she continues. She is immediately present as a living victim of environmental injustice, and if her appearance does not evoke that of a victim, she details the hidden health impacts that her body—as that of a black woman from the South Bronx—is likely to experience. Her words reinforce her authenticity and embodied experience in the South Bronx; even her clothing—a close-fitting black tee shirt and blue jeans—speaks of a place far removed from an elite, Long Beach audience. Her exposed, toned arms are those of someone who rolls up her sleeves and works with her body. Her stage presence is full of restrained energy: she rocks on her heels and moves around, clasping her hands in front of her at times in an almost supplicatory way. At the same time she appears relaxed, confident, and in control—speaking to peers, even when mildly chiding Gore.

Carter's physical presence thus serves as an embodied bridge between the oppressed other and her elite audience. Her presence and her story posit her as an authentic voice, one who has put her body on the line, in a way reminiscent of Houck's description of Ed King (Houck 68), though in Carter's case the disfigurement is an emotional one, signified most powerfully by her brief moment of tears.

In addition to its embodied and visual nature, Carter's address is primarily oral in the experience of its wider audience because of its distribution as a video clip, rather than as a transcribed speech. Although mediated by video capture and the web, Carter's address is experienced orally, and the comments of website visitors make the immediate, emotional impact of her speech clear. She is in effect present and speaking directly to her Web audience because we hear her voice and see her body moving, smiling, crying, and gesturing. In addition, her address displays the features of an African-American orality. She playfully engages her audience with humor, mild exaggeration, and shared-knowledge cues—as when she engages in a kind of co-conspiratorial eye-rolling. Her reasoning is pragmatic and grounded, even when she pleads with her audience, “Please don't waste me.”

The content of her address reinforces themes of environmental justice and does so in a way recognized by her wider audience. Viewers often rate the talk as an important contribution to a worthwhile subject. She uses the trope of the embattled community to establish place and to situate agency, and then invites her audience into that community by straddling two worlds. She is both emissary and welcome wagon.

The image of a foot in both camps clarifies one of the speech's most powerful characteristics: a balanced dynamic tension—between rational science and embodied experience, business and humanity, ghetto and elite, critique and invitation. She balances social worlds by being like her audience, yet different from them. This tension is mirrored in the emotional terrain of the speech, particularly at three points: when she shifts from talk of marriage to an enumeration of

environmental injustices against Blacks; when she jokes with the audience about being good-looking and never having been in jail, then breaks down into tears over her brother's death; and when she transitions to some light humor about “Green is the New Black” to the sobering images of Katrina.

This push-pull helps Carter achieve a delicate balance. As an environmental justice proponent, she must critique the system that produced the injustices of which she speaks. As members of the elite, her immediate audience is, in indirect ways, the source of this injustice—or might feel they are being described as such. Carter's balance of humor and powerful emotion keeps this tension working to her favor, as she creates discomfort and then shows a path towards its resolution.

The result is what creates the powerful emotional response in her audience. Not the direct pathos of her personal experiences or even her engaged, energetic delivery (though these help), but the placement of the listener into a liminal, shifting space without solid reference points, except through the path of the broadly characterized call to action. Notably, viewers are responding to this call by sharing their opinions on the web, by recommending the speech to others, and by embedding it on their web logs. The act of commenting on the address becomes for many audience members a direct and totalizing response, allowing them to participate with Carter in the shared community she creates. This enactment further enhances circulation, though it might be argued that it also drains off energies for more substantive change, if viewers feel they have done their part simply by commenting on a website or embedding HTML code into a blog.

More research is needed on the impact of the variable web frame that results when anyone can “host” Carter's address. As Russell argues in her discussion of “liquid media,” it's not clear what the impact of this might be. Is it, for example, comparable to effects of the typeface, layout, and other contextual elements when a speech by Frederick Douglass or Malcolm X is reprinted in many different newspapers—that is, effectively nil? Or can the aggregate contextual framing of this

mediated talk, across a number of websites, promote or inhibit certain other readings of the text?

Although there is plentiful research on the relative effectiveness of computer-based learning, we do not yet have a clear understanding of the possible impact of varying electronic contexts for an address of this nature.

One intriguing possibility is that the ability of web audience members to “adopt” the message and surround it with personal commentary on their blogs creates a new kind of participation in the rhetoric and authorizes it for subsequent viewers. The informal nature of blog writing and user comments suggests some of the characteristics of orality and presence, recreating the living audience even within the disembodied environment of the computer screen.

Only with a better understanding of the way a text evolves through this kind of circulation can we come to a more definitive understanding of what will likely become an increasingly common mode of publication. Until then, we can only speculate about some of these processes, as I have done here. What is more certain, however, is that Carter's embodiment of her message and the dynamics of the discursive space into which she pulls her auditors generated an enthusiastic response, and serve as a model for a way of bringing the environmental justice message to an audience that has embraced its inner capitalist. She also demonstrates the way an embodied and oral message can retain its immediate and authentic power even when attenuated through computer monitors, remaining alive for successive audiences. As technology begins to afford even more immediate senses of presence through live videoconferencing, holographs, and immersive virtual worlds, the very ancient mode of the unmediated oral address will likely haunt us even more than Gunn has observed, and in unexpected ways.

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Figure 1: The TED Talks Frame

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