

**Iowa State University**

---

**From the Selected Works of Kathleen Hunt**

---

2012

**“It’s more than planting trees, it’s planting ideas”:  
The rhetorical power of bodies in Kenya’s Green  
Belt Movement**

Kathleen P. Hunt, *University of Utah*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/kathleen-hunt/4/>

# “IT’S MORE THAN PLANTING TREES, IT’S PLANTING IDEAS:” ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND ECOFEMINISM IN THE GREEN BELT MOVEMENT

Kathleen P. Hunt

University of Utah

---

*Kathleen Hunt is a doctoral student in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah. She would like to extend her thanks to the editor and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Correspondence to: University of Utah, Department of Communication, 255 S. Central Campus Drive, Suite LNCO 2400, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, Kathleen.Hunt@utah.edu.*

## *Abstract*

*The Green Belt Movement (GBM) emerged as a response to environmental degradation in post-colonial Kenya. Three campaigns characterize the movement’s primary thrust: tree planting, civic/environmental engagement seminars, and a political demonstration. Each of these exposed material incongruities as participants argued for environmental and social change. Warren’s (2000) ecofeminist concept of “power-toward” is used to examine how GBM sought “movement away from unhealthy life-denying systems and relationships” (p. 200). The “power-toward” potentiality of each campaign built on that which came before it; taken in aggregate, these actions demonstrate the rhetorical constitution of an environmentally stable, democratic Kenya. As a case study of environmental justice in the Global South, GBM is used to explicate how a marginalized population was able to revision their political consciousness.*

***Keywords: Environmental Justice, Ecofeminism, Perspective by Incongruity, Green Belt Movement***

By the early 1970s, Kenya was largely deforested, causing substantial soil erosion, contamination of streams and rivers, and malnutrition (Maathai, 2006). Against this exigency, the Green Belt Movement (GBM) sought to mobilize “women around tree-planting income-generating activities, consciousness raising, women’s rights, and political empowerment,” connecting environmental degradation to other issues of civic engagement (Nagel, 2005, p. 1). Initiated by Wangari Maathai, Kenya’s first female to receive her doctorate and run for Parliament, the movement “was structured to avoid the urge to work *for* [and work instead] *with*...the people,” characterizing its “empowering approach” (emphasis added, Nagel, 2005, p. 3). As participants connect environmental degradation to political oppression, GBM constitutes an

environmental justice movement.

Analyses of environmental justice (EJ) in the field of communication have been primarily limited to case studies within the United States (DeLuca, 1999; Peeples & DeLuca, 2006; Pezzullo, 2007). This is perhaps because the prevailing narrative surrounding EJ similarly confines the movement (Pezzullo, 2001). Some critical scholarship has examined environmental justice as it is experienced in non-Western contexts rearticulating EJ to include communities previously ignored (Sandler & Pezzullo, 2007). For the field of environmental communication to fully exercise its ethical duty as Cox (2007) suggests, it behooves us to maintain this momentum. Cases and contexts to which scholars attune are imbued with a certain degree of power. By limiting this attention to the Global North, “we are missing out on, and writing ‘out of history,’ important texts that gird and influence local cultures” (Ono & Sloop, 1995, p. 19). Indeed, oppressive environmental practices occur worldwide, and broadening our analytical scope may challenge us to re-think Environmental Justice as the movement has been, or continues to be, experienced across communities.

My examination of GBM as a case study of environmental justice also demonstrates the applicability of an ecofeminist framework. I argue that what is behind GBM’s approach is the ecofeminist conception of “power-toward.” Warren (2000) submits that a system of power that seeks “movement away from unhealthy life-denying systems and relationships” represents “power-toward” (p. 200). I argue that “power-toward” facilitated an alternative conception of political agency for GBM activists. As the rhetorical agency afforded by embodied participation in GBM campaigns grew across the movement, an alternative conception of Kenya’s identity was articulated.

The time at which GBM was initiated represents a context of global environmental and feminist awareness as many programs and social movements addressing the intersection of these concerns were introduced. The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) was established in 1972 with the “guiding principle” to “safeguard and enhance the environment for the benefit of present and future generations” (UNEP, 1979). 1975 was designated International Women’s Year with the first UN Conference on Women in Mexico City, launching the UN Decade for Women. Several environmental justice movements were initiated around this time as well. Women of Himalayan villages organized the Chipko movement to protest commercial forest management through non-violent action; by 1980 the Chipko movement counted a 15-year injunction on commercial tree felling as their success (Shiva & Bandyopadhyay, 1986). In the United States, struggles in Warren County, North Carolina and at Love Canal raised awareness of toxic waste dumpsites (Gibbs, 1982; Pezzullo, 2001).

This essay examines three campaigns that constitute the primary thrust of GBM: a tree-planting initiative, civic and environmental education seminars, and a demonstration in Kenya’s Uhuru Park. The aim of my analysis is to characterize a rhetorical theme across the movement’s most intense periods of demonstration, 1977-1993. Well after her acceptance of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, Maathai continued to organize GBM events worldwide until her death in September, 2011. The issues for which the Green Belt Movement works have expanded from the immediate exigency of Kenya to include climate change and environmental education around the world (Kirkscey, 2007; Maathai, 2006). Limiting my analysis to early campaigns allows for a greater understanding of the rhetorical strategies used to mobilize and empower rural Kenyan women seeking environmental and political change at a key point in the movement’s history. This also allows for a better understanding of environmental justice movements in this context.

I contend that embodied participation in GBM campaigns empowered rural Kenyan women to revise their political consciousness; individually, each of these acts rhetorically exposed

material incongruities, opening the space to reconstruct identity. As the movement progressed, I argue, the “power-toward” potentiality of each action built on that which came before it; thus, taken in aggregate, these actions demonstrate the rhetorical constitution of an environmentally stable and democratic Kenya.

## *Ecofeminism, Embodied Social Movement Tactics, and Rhetorical Agency*

Ecofeminism, with its critical ideological orientation to power, seeks to uncover and dismantle discourses of oppression (Rogers & Schutten, 2004). While there are many foci in ecofeminist literature (for example spirituality, animals, activism, and ethics among others), the primary principle uniting them is the critique of multiple, nested oppressions affecting the environment and the lives of women around the world (Gaard, 1993; Mellor, 1997; Vakoch, 2011; Warren, 2000). Specifically, Birkeland (1993) defines ecofeminism as a form of political analysis that is especially attuned to “deeply rooted patterns and structural relationships” that lead to environmental and social injustice (p. 14). From this perspective, patriarchy is viewed as the key framework for “authorizing oppressions” and constructing a self/other dualism fundamental to the Othering of nature (Plumwood, 1993). Thus, it is through ecofeminist critique that naturalized systems of oppression can be exposed and transformed.

As ecofeminism functions as a theoretical framework, it is also a practice. Ecofeminism is rooted in philosophy and environmental ethics, and social transformation is its ultimate aim. It follows that ecofeminism cannot only be a lens for critique, but must also be performed. Indeed, Mellor (1997) finds ecofeminists’ starting point as “the importance of human *embodiment*... and embeddedness (within the surrounding ecosystem)” (emphasis added, p. 68.). First, Mellor models the paradigmatic shift from a patriarchal dualism that distances humans from that which is non-human in her acknowledgement of humans’ biological existence within not just a social context, but an ecological one. Her statement also recognizes that as systems of oppression are actively practiced, the efforts to resist them are as well. Avenues of ecofeminist practice ripe for analysis include nuclear and toxic waste activism, international development, and labor struggles (O’Loughlin, 1993).

Indeed, an ecofeminist critique can “lay out the preconditions for transformation within a set of social relations” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 103), and as ecofeminists working on the ground actively perform theoretical concepts, ecofeminism, as a set of principles and theoretical constructs, embodies the same sense of praxis as critical rhetoric. Ecofeminist critique operates like a “prism that de-forms our attitude toward non-human nature” (Birkeland, 1993, p. 16) in a way that is similar to critical rhetoric’s critiques of domination and freedom (McKerrow, 1989). Thus, it is the emphasis on practice and transformation that makes ecofeminism a viable analytical tool for critical rhetoricians.

Karen Warren (2000) devised a theoretical framework for understanding how different forms of power are practiced; I contend this framework offers a useful mechanism for critical rhetoricians who “deal in concrete terms with those relations which are ‘real’- which do in fact constrain discourse, and do so in ways that are seldom seen without analysis” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 103). Warren’s typology consists of five forms of power: “power-over,” that which creates Up/Down relationships, characterized by “restriction of liberties” and coercion; “power-with,” creating “relatively equalizing” coalitions of shared power, seeking solidarity; “power-within,” characterized by empowerment and the mobilizing of “inner resources;” “power-against,” typically expressed when Downs rebel against Ups; and “power-toward,” characterized by change

from one belief system to another (p. 200).

The final type, “power-toward,” can enhance the analysis of social movements from a rhetorical perspective. As “power-toward” is “the sort of power individuals or groups of individuals *exercise* when they make changes in their lives, when...they *move from* something *to* something else” (emphasis added, Warren, 1994, p. 183), it can inform the analysis of social movement tactics, particularly those characterizing the discourse of marginalized peoples. Inasmuch as “power-toward” represents one way a group can “put [their] own ideas of an emancipatory society into practice” (Kelly, 1997, p. 114), analysis of rhetorical agency in social movements is also remiss to neglect this theoretical construct.

Social movement tactics can also be viewed as “rhetorical performances of resistance” (Pezzullo, 2007, p. 3). The critical function of embodied tactics is their ability to illuminate inconsistencies in the system to which the movement is responding. In this way, body rhetoric articulates rhetorical agency especially when mobilized by oppressed and marginalized groups. By “provid[ing] a set of practical resources for enacting...[a rearticulated political] consciousness,” body rhetoric can “constitute new forms of agency in the face of lived... oppression” (Enck-Wanzer, 2006, p. 176). Body rhetoric often serves a constitutive function in social movements because it allows for the opening of a “discursive space” altering “people’s consciousness about their relationship to ‘the system’ and the possibilities for their futures” (Enck-Wanzer, 2006, p. 189). Thus, my aim is to understand “the ways in which a discourse represents a shift away from or challenge to a dominant social imaginary” (Enck-Wanzer, 2006, p. 177). The use of the phrase “shift away from” suggests Warren’s “power-toward.”

Ecofeminist constructs, like Warren’s (2000) power typology, can inform the rhetorical analysis of social movements. Rogers and Schutten (2004) submit that ecofeminism is not “a singular ideology, theory, or method” and can be understood, therefore, as both an ontology and an epistemology (p. 263), indeed its amorphous nature may make this framework particularly valuable. However, with several notable exceptions (DeLuca, 1999, Rogers & Schutten, 2004; Vakoch, 2011), little rhetorical scholarship has engaged it as either method or theory.

It may be that this apparent lack of rhetorical ecofeminist scholarship is the result of the criticism most commonly levied against it. That is, essentialist assumptions of an intrinsic linkage between women/the “feminine” with nature (O’Loughlin, 1993; Plumwood, 1993). DeLuca (1999) summarizes this critique by noting that this form of ecofeminist theorizing “perpetuates a modern nature that limits what can be considered as an environment deserving of protection, narrows what can be counted as environmental politics, [and] blocks necessary coalitions across gender, race, and class lines” (p. 68). Negligence in rhetorical scholarship leaves the valuable contributions of ecofeminist critique (and its potentiality in rhetoric) marginalized, rendering it invisible within rhetorical literature. As rhetorical critics, it behooves us to flesh out theoretical kinks so that we may best understand “symbolic transformation” (McGee, 1983). Ecofeminism, particularly its conceptions of power, can inform our understanding of rhetoric and social movements generally, and environmental justice specifically. Greater scrutiny of ecofeminist literature/forms is needed to parse out inconsistencies. In what follows, I offer my analysis of three campaigns performed by the Green Belt Movement. For each of these actions, the capacity for “power-toward” is examined with emphasis placed on the rhetorical agency afforded to GBM participants and the way this is characterized across the movement.

### *GBM’s Body Rhetoric and Rhetorical Agency*

Although British colonial rule in Kenya ended in 1963, the legacies of imperialism posed political, economic, and environmental challenges that persisted well after independence was

gained. Deforestation and malnutrition resulted from a dependence on a cash-crop economy. Nyang'oro (2001) submits: "In many instances, cash crop production has led to misguided government policies that lead to environmental deterioration while yielding few benefits economically" (p. 233). One GBM participant reflects on Kenya's dependence on crops like timber, tea and coffee: "Sadly, I think the government made the decision, maybe mistakenly, that they continue with the Colonial practice of exploiting the forest and not recovering forested lands" (Merton & Dater, 2008). In her memoir, Wangari Maathai (2006) explains how this economic system rendered Kenya's ecosystems and landscapes diminished and unhealthy: "I saw rivers silted with topsoil... much of the land that had been covered by trees, bushes, and grasses when I was growing up had been replaced by tea and coffee" (p. 121).

When President Daniel Arap Moi rose to power in 1978, it was clear that "Kenya had become a dictatorship, ruled...by a president who kept an iron grip on power" (Maathai, 2006, p. 181). The Kenyan political system was rife with corruption and tribal conflict such that, according to Maathai, "corruption became the culture of those in power.... In addition, the atmosphere became increasingly repressive as the regime ignored the needs of the people" (p. 181). One GBM participant remembers the Moi regime: "It was brutal. It was very, very powerful. It had the country in its grip and it had the power and the willingness to use that power to crush any opposition" (Merton & Dater, 2008). One way the Moi regime made "people fear authority" (Merton & Dater, 2008), was by imprisoning those who spoke against it. It was widely known that those suspected of democratic sympathies were arrested under erroneous charges and detained for indefinite periods of time; it was later revealed that the police employed methods of torture on those imprisoned (Maathai, 2006).

This is the immediate context in which GBM was formed. In the documentary, *Taking Root*, Maathai summarizes this material exigency as follows:

*...we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the earth to heal her wounds, and in the process heal our own.* (Merton & Dater, 2008)

Even from the movement's infancy, concerns of environmental responsibility were linked to issues of fair governance. Yet the statement suggests an incongruity in the lived experience of Kenyan citizens: an ecosystem that should be life sustaining is instead dying, and a government that should protect its people is instead brutally oppressing them.

Burke (1989) offers the concept of perspective by incongruity as a method that questions a current system of practice, exposing ideological inconsistencies. Burke explains that humans use "schema of orientation" that organize our "sense of what properties go with what" (p. 74). When we are "pious" to these schema, that is when they go unquestioned, they act as "system builder[s]" informing our view of "what ought to be" (p. 71). Perspective by incongruity rests on a rhetor's "impiety" to an existing vocabulary, rearticulating the meaning of an experience through their "piety" to a new set of meanings. That is, a rhetor may "attempt to *reorganize* one's orientations" thereby offering new meanings (emphasis in original, Burke, 1989, p. 80). Indeed, in situations in which ideologies are oppressive, "where the accepted linkages have been an imposing sort," Burke suggests intentionally reordering accepted categories (p. 120). The process of reorganization creates "new linkages of vocabulary...generat[ing] new orientations" such that it simultaneously represents "a break in the continuity of an ideology and a transition from one conception of self to another" (Whedbee, 2001, p. 49). Thus, perspective by incongruity can function as a transformative argument, re-constituting identity.

As a form of argument, perspective by incongruity is utilized to dismantle a previous



conception as well as to offer a new one. Thus, my analysis of GBM proceeds from the following assumption: perspective by incongruity “generates a kind of identity crisis” inasmuch as the “process of destroying and recreating values is intimately related to the process of destroying and recreating the self” (Whedbee, 2001, p. 48). Through the action of planting trees, engaging in civic educational seminars, and baring their naked bodies in protest, GBM participants perform the function of perspective by incongruity: “redefinition that re-evaluates, and gives new meaning to, an existing set of circumstances” (Dow, 1994, p. 323).

Although Burke (1989) names Medieval gargoyles as one non-verbal example of perspective by incongruity, treatment of this concept has largely focused on its function in written text (Foss, 1979; Dow, 1994) and public address (Whedbee, 2001). Paystrup’s (1996) analysis of advertisements represents one point of departure from this trend; her analysis demonstrates the viability of Burke’s perspective for a non-verbal argument. I propose that perspective by incongruity can be rhetorically invoked through embodied practice—that even without the use of spoken word, actions can construct new symbolic *associations* that, in this case, perform “power-toward” and re-constitute Kenyan identities.

### *Foresters Without Diplomas*

In the early 1970s, Maathai began working with a local civic organization, the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK). As NCWK prepared for the 1975 UN Conference on Women in Mexico City, Maathai organized seminars at which women from various rural Kenyan communities discussed their experiences of environmental and economic injustice. For Maathai, it became apparent that “everything [rural women] lacked depended on the environment” (Maathai, 2006, p. 124). One GBM participant explains that “to improve the environment, all that we need, and we can do it, is just to plant trees” (Merton & Dater, 2008); so the tree-planting initiative was conceived.

For each tree seedling planted and successfully matured for six months, participants earned the equivalent of 4 US cents. Educational seminars were held to teach participants about planting and germinating seeds. Representatives from the Kenyan Department of Forests met with GBM participants to teach them about planting trees and running nurseries. Maathai (2006) reports that “these were difficult encounters” as “nearly all of [the women] were poor and illiterate” —the forestry professionals were too technical in their explanations, and even patronized participants by telling them “you need people with diplomas to plant trees” (Merton & Dater, 2008). Instead, Maathai held her own seminars, encouraging participants to draw on their experience as farmers, teaching them how to plant seeds in their own terms. As the women gained experience and confidence in their tree planting, they “started showing one another, and before we knew it tree nurseries were springing up...around the country” (Maathai, 2006, p. 136). One participant reflects on the meaning of this experience:

*Ours was the first community group to begin a tree nursery.... Nobody thought we could plant trees. It was not a Kikuyu custom for women to plant trees. So when we planted, we felt we had made a breakthrough to be associated with trees.* (Merton & Dater, 2008)

Over time, Maathai and other GBM organizers realized the need for rural communities to devise their own tree-planting strategy based on local needs. Maathai (2006) recalls: “I learned that if you do not have local people who are committed to the process and willing to work with their communities, the process will not survive” (p. 132). Further, it was important that “local people feel invested in the projects so they would mobilize themselves and their neighbors to take responsibility for sustaining [the trees]” (p. 133). This organic approach to facilitating the tree-

planting initiative demonstrates an instantiation of ecofeminism by GBM participants.

As evidenced by the reflections offered by GBM participants, the tree-planting campaign empowered rural Kenyan women by “inform[ing] them, and mak[ing] them understand that the [depleted] resources are their own resources, they must protect them” (Merton & Dater, 2008), acknowledging participants’ embodiment and embeddedness in their own ecosystem (Mellor, 1997). The immediate exigency from which GBM emerged—extreme environmental degradation, repressive government, and ethnic conflict—characterizes a pious acceptance of domination, patriarchy, and colonialism. That the reigning economic policy of this period required the depletion of indigenous forest in favor of planting non-native cash crops (Nyang’oro, 2001), demonstrates an unquestioned “sense of what property goes with what” (Burke, 1989, p. 74).

These female “foresters without diplomas” (Maathai, 2006) enacted their impiety to the dominant colonial and patriarchal vocabulary in an “attempt to *reorganize*.... orientations from the past” (emphasis original, Burke, 1989, p. 80). By planting native tree seedlings, the practice of deforestation is resisted. This action connects, for Maathai, the environmental goals of GBM to pre-colonial Kenyan values and practices: “People who are colonized lose a lot of knowledge accumulated through the ages—in the food they eat, in the way they prepare it, in the way they pass the art of agriculture to the next generation” (Merton & Dater, 2008). By defying the Department of Forests officials’ comments, these women “violat[ed] common sense assumptions” (Whedbee, 2001) about their ability and worthiness to mobilize themselves and take responsibility for sustaining their own future. They performatively reordered the schema of their gender and their land. Rather than creating verbally “incongruent word combinations,” GBM responded to the “ironic image” of the environmental effects of a cash-crop economy and poor malnourished people through the action of planting tree seedlings. Their embodied performance unearthed “deeply rooted behavior patterns and structural relationships that led to the environmental crisis” that Kenya was experiencing at that time (Birkeland, 1993, p. 14).

Participation in this campaign represents a key initial step for Kenyan women to move “away from life-denying systems and relationships,” enacting Warren’s (2000) “power-toward” concept (p. 200). Deforestation is necessarily life denying as it destroyed robust forest and has left Kenya’s land horribly eroded and malnourished. By resisting this practice, GBM participants enacted a new vocabulary, redefining their role in Kenyan society. Life is given back to the soil by the physical planting of trees, and political life is given to the rural women as they practice rhetorical agency. Thus, GBM’s tree-planting initiative made present the voices of rural Kenyan women.

### *Riding/Righting the Wrong Bus*

Maathai notes that while “the movement started as a tree planting campaign...it’s a little more than just the planting of trees... it’s giving people reasons why they should stand for their rights...it’s the planting of ideas” (Merton & Dater, 2008). To uproot the “reasons” needed to facilitate greater political and economic change in Kenya, GBM began holding community engagement seminars in which participants were “encouraged...to identify their problems” (Maathai, 2006, p. 173). Through a dialogic process, communities worked to “identify the roots of the disempowerment that plagued the Kenyan people” (p. 173).

Facilitated by GBM staff, the interactive seminars “ensured that the experiences and concerns of the participants formed the basis for discussion and recommendations” (Maathai, 2006, p. 47). Because of the environmental exigency that initially spurred the movement’s activities and the recognition of unjust government practices by those attending the seminars, these “[d]iscussions were...focused on the linkages between poor governance and environmental



degradation” (p. 47). With original footage and English subtitles, Merton and Dater’s (2008) documentary, *Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai*, offers a rare glimpse into the generative processes of these seminars.

In a small room, a group of more than ten people are gathered, sitting in rows of folding chairs. Kinyanjul Kluno, GBM staff member and discussion facilitator, stands at the front of the room with the question, “How does a person lose their way?” written on the board behind him. Kluno engages the community in this discussion through a metaphor that symbolizes Kenya’s current state of oppression: “What would make you get on a bus that’s going somewhere else?” he asks the group. The seminar participants generate answers: “confusion,” “confusing thoughts,” “not asking questions,” and “fear.” Kluno asks: “Did you get on the wrong bus?” One participant answers, “We could have.” Kluno continues to ask the participants to parse out reasons why. Several participants answer: “We have nobody to ask” and “If we ask, we’re always given the runaround.” As the discussion continues, participants reflect on their own responsibility for the problems they currently face. With Kluno, they come to realize that they “didn’t ask questions because of fear” and that they “just sit there” (Merton & Dater, 2008) rather than “standing up for what they strongly believed in and demanding that the government provide it” (Maathai, 2006, p. 173).

These discussion seminars revealed to GBM participants that “[c]itizens, too, played a part in the problems” (Maathai, 2006, p. 173). Through the act of public conversation, GBM participants “would come to the conclusion, we need stop the bus... let us educate each other” and decide they are “ready to confront the driver” (Merton & Dater, 2008). One participant even mentions taking the “wrong bus” message “to women here and there,” to “have groups” with those unable to attend the GBM meetings (Merton & Dater, 2008).

The “wrong bus” metaphor exposes an incongruity the GBM seminar participants weren’t otherwise aware of in their conceptions of their own political agency. Recognizing their own agency in contributing to the problems they currently face, this metaphor acts as an “essential disruption” (Dow, 1994, p. 323) in how these people view their subject position. In this way, GBM participants can “*be observers of themselves while acting*,” bringing with it the critical awareness of “*maximum consciousness*” (emphasis in original, Burke, 1959, p. 171). Thus, through an interactive dialogue, the “wrong bus” metaphor “re-evaluates, and gives new meaning” to what it means to be Kenyan, reconstituting Kenya’s history of colonial rule (Dow, 1994, p. 323). The piety of the passive-poor-degraded-Kenyan is disrupted, offering instead images of a responsible-accountable-empowered Kenyan identity. It is the practice of the dialogue, not the metaphor itself that achieves this rhetorical effect.

In this way, the seminars themselves articulate impiety to an existing vocabulary that excludes a nation’s people from engaging with their elected leaders. One GBM participant interviewed for Merton and Dater’s (2008) documentary, explains the significance of educational seminars promoting civic engagement: “What the government of that particular time did not want is anybody who is trying to educate the common people.” Thus, GBM participants gathering at these seminars were not supposed to be anything but passive actors in President Moi’s political drama. Of the three campaigns examined here, these seminars perhaps most directly demonstrate not only a “breaking down [of] old schemas of orientation,” but GBM’s “offer [of a] replacement” (Burke, 1989, p. 111). Indeed, while the metaphor revealed the participants’ misguided agency in contributing to their own plight, the seminars made available a space to expose their capacity for political consciousness and rhetorical agency to question unjust practices of their government.

An embodied perspective by incongruity offers GBM participants an avenue for transition from a once oppressive orientation, what Warren (2000) would call an “unhealthy system,” to one

that is healthy and creates power-toward. Clearly, the system of oppressive political rule facing Kenya is one “unhealthy relationship” that the movement is seeking to change. But there is also a personal, interpersonal, and inter-tribal relationship that is being impiously rearticulated here. Referring to the ethnic conflicts prevalent in Kenya at the time, one GBM participant explains the significance of the civic engagement seminars: “we started the seminars so that we really could see what are the causes of these tribal clashes.... Why are people, people who have been going to the same church, killing each other?” (Merton & Dater, 2008).

The community dialogue represents an exercise through which the underlying causes of Kenya’s tribal conflict can be examined. Indeed, it is the *process* of engaging in the dialogue that demonstrates a GBM ecofeminist practice. Birkeland (1993) finds “process...as important as goals” in ecofeminism as it is through progressive clarification that the goals of social transformation can be realized. This dialogue offered participants a way to move from the “unhealthy” and literally “life-denying relationship” (Warren, 2000, p. 200) of violence to a healthier relationship typical of community members. Recalling her experience in these seminars, Maathai (2006) writes of how “wonderful” it was “to see ordinary women and men speaking confidently... and so honestly and openly” (p. 174). This statement recognizes participants’ ability to “make changes in their lives” (Warren, 1994, p. 183). In this way, the civic engagement seminars create a discursive space in which “people’s consciousness about their relationship to ‘the system’ and the possibilities for their futures” can be at once challenged and re-articulated (Enck-Wanzer, 2006, p. 189).

## *Freedom Corner*

Maathai (2006) explains that by 1992 “it was no longer a crime to advocate for multipartism” in Kenya (p. 216). It was evident, however, that the Moi regime was arresting and detaining pro-democracy activists. It later became known that these political detainees were being held indefinitely and tortured, many of them dying in prison (Maathai, 2006). Several women, mothers of many of the political prisoners, formed the group Release Political Prisoners (RPP) and appealed to Maathai to form a coalition with GBM. Recognizing that along with being “an environmental, women’s, and human rights movement,” GBM “was also part of the broader movement for democracy,” the two groups agreed to work together (Maathai, 2006, p. 182).

Allied participants petitioned Kenya’s Attorney General and demonstrated in Nairobi’s Uhuru (“Freedom”) National Park. What began as a nonviolent three-day sit-in, candlelight vigil, and hunger strike in the corner of the park—immediately adjacent to Nairobi’s federal building (named “Freedom Corner” by the demonstrators)—became a yearlong battle between GBM/RPP participants and Kenyan police (Maathai, 2006). On the fourth day of non-violent demonstrations, police arrived with tear gas and “began charging us from behind and in front, beating us with their batons” with “the sound of gunshots fill[ing] the air” soon thereafter (Maathai, 2006, p. 220). Maathai was sent to the hospital after being injured in the struggle.

Several of the protesters remained in the park; resisting the violent actions of the police, they chose to enact “[o]ne of the most powerful of African traditions” (Maathai, 2006, p. 221). Original footage shows several women, wearing long skirts and t-shirts, suddenly stripping themselves “stark naked,” gesticulating with their naked bodies, arms raised in the air, shaking their breasts in front of the male police officers (Merton & Dater, 2008). One of these women recalls her experience: “We were attacked brutally... Luckily I was able to help by quickly undressing. Naked, I fought the police and made them leave. And that’s how we saved the women” (Merton & Dater, 2008).

In her memoir (2006), Maathai describes the significance in Kenyan tradition of the act of

baring one's breasts:

*Every woman old enough to be your mother is considered like your own mother and expects to be treated with considerable respect. As they bared their breasts, what the mothers were saying to the policemen...was 'By showing you my nakedness, I curse you as I would my son for the way you are abusing me.'* (p. 221)

While this particular demonstration ended with the GBM/RPP protestors being forced to vacate Uhuru Park and having Freedom Corner barricaded, many women continued advocating on behalf of their unjustly imprisoned sons by seeking sanctuary in a nearby Catholic church. Eleven months later, nearly all of the 52 prisoners were released.

The Freedom Corner demonstration rhetorically exposed the unjust actions of the Moi regime. That the abuse, symbolized by the protestors' bare and shaking breasts, occurred in Freedom Corner represents an "ironic image" (Whedbee, 2001). The violence levied against the demonstrators performs an analogy: the mothers bearing the violence of the police are linked to their sons' experience of state-sanctioned torture. In this way, the brutality of Moi's dictatorship, the most violent of which is enacted secretly, is brought to light in the public square. On the rhetorical significance of body rhetoric, Pezzullo (2007) submits that "bodies act on the world as the world acts on bodies" (p. 67). That police bodies brutally acted on naked protestor bodies in Freedom Park that day is a literal demonstration of Pezzullo's point. The presence of the women's bare breasts represents an embodied way to "re-describe familiar surroundings in unfamiliar terms;" the performed analogy acts to "create unlikely connections between evidence and claim" (Levasseur, 1993, p. 202). In this way, GBM demonstrators give new meanings to the practices of the Moi regime, exposing its brutality. Thus, this performed juxtaposition represents an embodied form of perspective by incongruity.

In her memoir, Maathai (2006) writes, "I knew that we could not live with a political system that killed creativity, nurtured corruption, and produced people who were afraid of their own leaders" (p. 183). The Freedom Corner campaign demonstrates the ultimate embodiment of GBM/RPP participants' "movement *from* something [a repressive government] *to* something [democracy, freedom from oppression]" (emphasis original, Warren, 1994, p. 183). That is, Freedom Corner represents the participants' performance of their rhetorical and political agency. By "just being there" and stripping naked, these women use their bodies to "enact a...message of dissent" (Enck-Wanzer, 2006, p. 189). Thus, it is "their very presence, their body rhetoric" (DeLuca, 1999) that exposes the injustices that have occurred behind the closed doors and in the underground offices of Kenya's federal building. By resisting the oppression of Kenya's violent dictatorship, these women enact a "new form of agency in the face of lived oppression" (Enck-Wanzer, 2006, p. 176).

Vertistine Mbaya, Maathai's close personal friend and GBM participant, described the Freedom Corner campaign as "demonstrating the potential power of a civil society" (Merton & Dater, 2008). Thus, the Freedom Corner demonstration represents GBM's fullest realization of "power-toward" (Warren, 2000). Compared to Freedom Corner, the previous campaigns represent relatively indirect appeals for change. That this protest was staged in a public space directly in front of Nairobi's federal building, the demonstration was GBM's literal "fight for a better government" (Merton & Dater, 2008). Birkeland (1993) submits that social transformation (and, thereby, ecofeminism) is processual, "because *how* we go about things determines where we go" (emphasis added, p. 20). Without tree-planting and civic engagement seminars earlier in the movement, GBM perhaps may not have gotten to Freedom Corner; rather, each campaign was built on the rearticulated political agency afforded by previous campaigns.

The protesters at Freedom Corner synecdochally represent the wider Kenyan constituency and their embodied performance exposes the need for their country to “put [its] own ideas of an emancipatory society into practice” (Kelly, 1997, p. 114). In this way, the emancipatory function of GBM’s perspective by incongruity, as it was guided by “power-toward,” re-constitutes not only the participants’ collective consciousness, but also Kenya’s consciousness as a nation.

## *Conclusion and Theoretical Implications*

Kenya’s Green Belt Movement began with a handful of concerned rural women and grew to more than 50,000 activists by the time of the Freedom Corner demonstration; more than 10 million trees were planted across Kenya through GBM campaigns between 1977 and 1991 (French, 1992). In 2006, Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. GBM has since expanded its efforts beyond Kenya, and now includes climate change and food security in its agenda.

Along with other analyses of embodied social movement tactics (DeLuca, 1999; Enck-Wanzer, 2006; Pezzullo, 2007) the Green Belt Movement serves as a case study for the examination of “rhetorical performances of resistance” (Pezzullo, 2007, p. 3). Further, my analysis demonstrates the applicability of an ecofeminist framework of power in a rhetorical analysis. The embodied nature of the three campaigns examined here represent performances that rhetorically exposed incongruities and advocated piety to a new discursive vocabulary; I have also expanded Burke’s (1989) perspective by incongruity beyond its traditional treatment (Foss, 1979; Dow, 1994; Whedbee, 2001).

My analysis of GBM demonstrates the applicability of an ecofeminist theoretical construct to a rhetorical analysis of social movement tactics. Ecofeminism is both a theoretical framework and a set of practices (Birkeland, 1993); GBM participants performed ecofeminism through perspective by incongruity. That many of the early contributors to social movement research implicitly refer to Warren’s (1994) typology demonstrates its merit. So that we may best come to understand modes of “symbolic transformation” (McGee, 1983), critics must have available all means of critique. That any one tool has its flaws is no reason to throw it away, rather it is a call for sharpening and refinement.

Burke (1989) describes perspective by incongruity as “taking a word usually applied to one setting and transferring its use to another setting...violating the properties of the word in its previous linkages” (p. 90). Foss (1979) submits that perspective by incongruity “can be used to accurately name a situation that is believed as inaccurate or false and to introduce change into the environment” (p. 7). This is accomplished by rhetorically “wrench[ing] loose a word belonging to a category and appl[y]ing it to...different categor[ies]” (Blankenship, Murphy, & Rosenwasser, 1974, p. 3). Through non-verbal argument, such as embodied performance, GBM participants accomplished these ends. Incongruities in several nested systems of oppression were rhetorically exposed by GBM’s tree-planting, civic engagement seminars, and Freedom Corner campaigns. While traditional analyses of perspective by incongruity have examined its use in written text (Dow, 1994) and public address (Whedbee, 2001), my analysis demonstrates that bodies can also perform this method of argument. It is the actions themselves that expose the impiety of Kenya’s then current practices while simultaneously enacting a piety to a new vocabulary of personal and collective responsibility, justice, and sustainability (Rosteck & Leff, 1989).

That GBM “was structured to avoid the urge to work *for* rather than *with*...the people,” (emphasis added, Nagel, 2005, p. 3) demonstrates its commitment to empowering those who, prior to their experience with GBM, may not have fully realized their political agency. By participating in the embodied performances that rhetorically questioned and exposed injustices, GBM demonstrators already seeking “to make changes in their lives” were able to rearticulate and



move away from “life-denying systems” of oppression (Warren, 2000, p. 200). The “power-toward” afforded by each campaign also built on that which came before it, ultimately culminating in the performance of “ordinary” people’s “ideas of an emancipatory society” (Kelly, 1997, p. 114) in Freedom Park, through which the entirety of the Moi regime’s unjust system was exposed.

#### End Note:

<sup>1</sup>The conference concluding the Decade was held in Nairobi, Kenya.

#### References

- Birkeland, J. (1993) Ecofeminism: Linking theory and practice. In G. Gaard (Ed.), *Ecofeminism: Women, animals, nature* (pp. 13-54). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Blankenship, J, Murphy, E., & Rosenwasser, M. (1974). Pivotal terms in the early works of Kenneth Burke. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 7(1), p. 1-25.
- Burke, K. (1959). *Attitudes toward history* (3rd ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1989). *Permanence and change: An anatomy of purpose*. 3rd. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cox, J. R. (2007). Nature’s “crisis disciplines:” Does environmental communication have an ethical duty? *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, 1(1), 5-20.
- DeLuca, K. M. (1999). *Image politics*. Mahwah, NJ: Earlbaum.
- Dow, B. J. (1994). AIDS, perspective by incongruity, and gay identity in Larry Kramer’s “1112 and Counting.” In C. E. Morris, III & S. H. Browne (Eds.), *Readings on the rhetoric of social protest* (pp. 320-334). State College, PA: Strata.
- Enck-Wanzer, D. (2006). Trashing the system: Social movement, intersectional rhetoric, and collective agency in the Young Lords Organization’s Garbage Offensive. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 92(2), 174-201.
- French, M. A. (1992, June 2). The woman and mother earth: Kenya’s Wangari Maathai, linking lives to the planet. *The Washington Post*, D1.
- Foss, S. (1979). Feminism confronts Catholicism: A study of the uses of perspective by incongruity. *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 3, 7-15.
- Gaard, G. C. (1993). Living interconnections with animals and nature. In G. Gaard (Ed.), *Ecofeminism: Women, animals, nature* (pp. 1-9). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Gibbs, L. (1982). *Love Canal: My story*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kelly, P. (1997). Women and power. In K. J. Warren (Ed.), *Ecofeminism: Women, culture, nature* (pp. 112-119). Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press.
- Kirkscey, R. (2007). Accommodating traditional African values and globalization: Narrative as argument in Wangari Maathai’s Nobel Prize lecture. *Women and Language*, 30(2), 12-17.
- Levasseur, D. G. (1993). Edifying arguments and perspective by incongruity: The perplexing argumentation method of Kenneth Burke. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 29(4), 195-203.
- Maathai, W. (2004). *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the approach and experience*. New York: Lantern.
- Maathai, W. (2006). *Unbowed*. New York: Knopf.
- McGee, C.M. (1983). Social movement as meaning. *Central States Speech Journal*, 34, 74-77.
- McKerrow, R. (1989). Critical rhetoric: Theory and praxis. *Communication Monographs*, 56, 91-111.
- Mellor, M. (1997). *Feminism and ecology*. New York: NYU Press.
- Merton, L. & Dater, A. (Directors/Producers). (2008). *Taking root: The vision of Wangari Maathai*. United States: Marlboro Productions.
- Nagel, M. (2005). Environmental justice and women’s rights: A tribute to Wangari Maathai. *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women’s and Gender Studies*, 2, 1-9.
- Nyang’oro, J. (2001). Africa’s environmental problems. In A. Gordon & D. Gordon (Eds.), *Understanding contemporary Africa* (pp. 217-243). Boulder: Lynn Rienner Publishers.
- O’Loughlin, E. (1993). Questioning sour grapes: Ecofeminism and the United Farm Workers Grape Boycott. In G. Gaard (Ed.), *Ecofeminism: Women, animals, nature* (pp.146-166). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Ono, K. A., & Sloop, J. M. (1995). The critique of vernacular discourses. *Communication Monographs*, 62, 19-46.
- Paystrup, P. (1996). Plastics as a ‘natural resource’: Perspective by incongruity for an industry in crisis. In J. G. Cantrill and C. L. Oravec (Eds.), *The symbolic earth: Discourse and our creation of the environment* (pp. 176-197). Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- Peebles, J. A., & DeLuca, K. M. (2006). The truth of the matter: Motherhood, community and environmental justice. *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 29(1), 59-87.
- Pezzullo, P. C. (2001). Performing critical interruptions: Stories, rhetorical invention, and the environmental justice



- movement. *Western Journal of Communication*, 65(1), 1-25.
- Pezzullo, P. C. (2007). *Toxic tourism: Rhetorics of pollution, travel, and environmental justice*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.
- Plumwood, V. (1993). Feminism and the mastery of nature. *Environmental Ethics*, 23, 19-36.
- Rogers, R. A., & Schutten, J. K. (2004). The gender of water and the pleasure of alienation: A critical analysis of visiting Hoover Dam. *The Communication Review*, 7, 259-283.
- Rosteck, T., & Leff, M. (1989). Piety, propriety, and perspective: An interpretation and application of key terms in Kenneth Burke's *Permanence and Change*. *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 53, 327-341.
- Sandler, R. & Pezzullo, P. C. (Eds.) (2007). *Environmental justice and environmentalism: The social justice challenge to the environmental movement*. MIT Press.
- Shiva, V. & Bandyopadhyay, J. (1986). The evolution, structure, and impact of the Chipko Movement. *Mountain Research and Development*, 6(2), 133-142.
- UNEP (1979). The United Nations Environment Programme. Nairobi, Kenya: UNEP.
- Vakoch, D. A. (Ed.) (2011). *Ecofeminism and rhetoric: Critical perspectives on sex, technology, and discourse*. Berghahn Books: Oxford.
- Warren, K. J. (1994). Toward an ecofeminist peace politics. In K. J. Warren (Ed.), *Ecological feminism* (pp. 179-199). New York: Routledge.
- Warren, K. J. (2000). *Ecofeminist philosophy: A Western perspective on what it is and why it matters*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Whedbee, K. (2001). Perspective by incongruity in Norman Thomas's "Some Wrong Roads to Peace." *Western Journal of Communication*, 65(1), 45-64.