“It's More Than Planting Trees, It's Planting Ideas”: Ecofeminist Praxis in the Green Belt Movement

Kathleen P. Hunt, *Iowa State University*

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Abstract

Led by Wangari Maathai, the Green Belt Movement emerged as a response to environmental degradation in post-colonial Kenya. This essay examines three GBM campaigns that operated as praxis to resist environmental and political oppression, empowering rural women to enact a political consciousness toward democracy and environmental justice. The ecofeminist conception of power-toward drives an analysis of the ways participants were empowered to materially rearticulate an environmentally stable, and democratic Kenya. As a case study of environmental justice in the Global South, this essay demonstrates the applicability of an ecofeminist framework in critical rhetorical analysis by exploring the dynamics of social change.

Key Words: Ecofeminism, Critical Rhetoric, Praxis, Environmental Justice

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1 Address correspondence to: kphunt@iastate.edu
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What can a hummingbird do? In a well-known fable, a hummingbird, with its small beak, can only bring one drop of water at a time to fight a voracious forest fire, yet the little bird is determined to do what it can while larger animals stand by. Wangari Maathai used this story\(^2\) to symbolize her work as an activist in Kenya, as well as in the global environmental movement. As Kenya’s first female to receive her doctorate and run for parliament, Maathai withstood threats, beatings, gunshots, and public embarrassment, dedicating her life’s work to fighting for environmental justice, gender equality, and democratic governance with the Green Belt Movement (GBM). This movement has been lauded for its “empowering approach” as it was “structured to avoid the urge to work for [and work instead] with” primarily poor, rural women mobilized around environmental and civic engagement campaigns (emphasis added, Nagel 2005, p. 3). Maathai’s death in September 2011 generated responses from around the globe, including published memorials composed by President Barack Obama and the Dalai Lama, as well as thousands of messages on a Green Belt Movement website created in her honor\(^3\). Like each drop of water carried by the fable’s hummingbird, GBM activists organized and participated in tree-planting initiatives, civic and environmental education seminars, and pro-democracy demonstrations. The aim of my analysis is to characterize a rhetorical theme across the movement’s most intense periods of demonstration, 1977-1993. This period was indeed a forest fire of environmental and political injustice as Kenya experienced extreme deforestation, soil erosion, malnutrition, and political corruption of its postcolonial independence (Nyang’oro, 2001). Extant rhetorical scholarship on GBM converges on several points: guided by a feminist

\(^2\) Mattha included the story of the hummingbird in several public addresses and documentaries. After her death in 2011, the Green Belt Movement created the “I am a Hummingbird” Campaign, and features a video clip of Matthai telling this story: http://wangari.greenbeltmovement.org/hummingbird/

\(^3\) The webpage created in tribute to Wangari Maathai can be found at: http://wangari.greenbeltmovement.org
politics, GBM empowered rural women to engage the connection between environmental justice and political change (Gorsevski, 2012; Kirkscey, 2007; Wolbert, 2011; Worthington, 2003). I argue that what unites these three points is the ecofeminist conception of “power-toward” coupled with a rhetorical materialist conception of praxis. Karen Warren (2000) submits that a system of power seeking “movement away from unhealthy life-denying systems and relationships,” thereby affirming healthy behavior, represents “power-toward” (p. 200). Such a conception of power and social change is rooted in a materialist understanding of intervention and transformative action (i.e. praxis). That praxis operates rhetorically to affect change in social situations; “power toward” is a tool for moving consciousness.

In this essay, I make critical connections between ecofeminism, environmental justice, and critical rhetoric by arguing that Maathai utilized “power-toward” to facilitate an alternative conception of political consciousness. Ecofeminism supports critical rhetoric through an emphasis on praxis, offering rhetorical scholars opportunity for productive engagement with social movements and environmental justice. Warren’s concept of “power-toward” is a useful heuristic for engaging dynamics of power and transformative social change. The Green Belt Movement (GBM) is examined for its use of ecofeminist politics and materialist praxis to move Kenya toward an empowered political consciousness.

Ecofeminism and/as Critical Rhetoric

Ecofeminism, with its critical ideological orientation to power, seeks to uncover and dismantle discourses of oppression (Bullis, 1996; Rogers & Schutten, 2004). While there are many foci in ecofeminist literature (spirituality, 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 (Bullis, 1996; Vakoch, 2011). Thus, for Mies and Shiva (1993)
an “ecofeminist perspective” is one that “propounds the need for a new cosmology and a new anthropology which recognizes that life in nature (which includes human beings) is maintained by means of co-operation, and mutual care and love” (p. 6). While ecofeminism shares with feminism the commitment to exposing and eliminating sexism, it is the added attention to environmental injustice that distinguishes it.

Important for this analysis, one strong line of debate within ecofeminist literature concerns the analytical treatment of so-called “third world” women. Much of ecofeminist thought has been generated from Western conceptions of oppression, gender, and equality, and, as Mohanty (1991) suggests, this often represents a subtle form of cultural imperialism when applied to non-Western contexts (p. 7). Indeed, historically, this kind of knowledge production has created a homogenized view of the “third world woman,” as well as of specific, particularly African, cultures (Mikell, 1997; Oyewumi, 1997). Ecofeminism is multi-faceted and complex. Thus, I have chosen to represent ecofeminist literature as what Mohanty (1991) calls an “imagined community,” that is, a model for alliance building based on “political rather than biological or cultural bases” (p. 4). Promoting alignment across discursive boundaries, scholars advocating political- and ecofeminist consciousness-raising may work together to illuminate a case study. Thus, while one ecofeminist construct, one explicitly conceptualized from a Western point of view, guides my analysis of GBM, it is placed in conversation with scholars identifying as African and Third World ecofeminists. In this way, Warren’s construct is offered as one ecofeminist framework that may contribute to critical rhetorical analysis of social movements.

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4 Warren (1994) introduces the power typology in an early essay; the construct is more fully developed in her book (2000) entitled, *Ecofeminist philosophy: A Western perspective on what it is and why it matters*. Warren self-reflectively explains her reasoning for a Western perspective in that it represents, “a particular vision of ecofeminist philosophy, one that is grounded in [her] own Western historical experience and academic feminist perspective” (p. xiii).
Ecofeminism is rooted in philosophy and environmental ethics with social transformation as its ultimate aim, operating not only as a lens for critique, but is also made material through practice. Following a feminist epistemology, ecofeminism is both knowledge production as well as a “mode of intervention into particular hegemonic discourses;…it is political praxis” (Mohanty, 1991, p. 53). Indeed, Bullis (1996) finds the emphasis on practice to be a “common thread” linking various strands of ecofeminist literature, citing GBM as a prime example.

As ecofeminist critique operates like a “prism that de-forms our attitude toward non-human nature” (Birkeland, 1993, p. 16), it is not dissimilar to critical rhetoric’s “demystifying function” (McKerrow, 1989) and critiques of ideology, oppression, and hegemony (McGee, 1980). These two domains are united in a materialist conception of praxis that understands its operation in both material and symbolic ways. Praxis requires practice (indeed, it does something in the world, and used in social situations). Thus, McKerrow asserts that critical rhetoric is not a method but a perspective for critique (2005), and insights made through this critical practice should be utilized by social actors participating in the situations identified as “possibilities for future action” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 92). The use of terms like “prism,” “perspective” and “political critique” to characterize ecofeminist critique align with similar uses of these terms in critical rhetoric; ecofeminism informs activism as “values and action are inseparable: one cannot care without acting” (Birkeland, 1993, p. 19). Further, praxis necessitates social change (i.e. transformation) (McKerrow, 1989). As a mode of intervention, rhetoric has force, moving political consciousness and directing action (McGee, 1980). Ecofeminism directs social action against patriarchy and androcentrism, as seen in movements against nuclear and toxic waste, international development, and labor injustice (O’Loughlin, 1993). Thus, ecofeminism and
critical rhetoric share core epistemological commitments, providing opportunity, I suggest, for fruitful cross-pollination.

Per McKerrow (1989), power “exists in a material sense, in and through the language which constitutes it” (p. 102), focusing critical attention to the “consciousness or collectivity” that uses a discourse to particular ends. Karen Warren (1994) offers a valuable heuristic for understanding how different forms of power are practiced and their impacts on consciousness. The interconnectedness of these human issues with the domination and destruction of nature that makes them ecofeminist concerns; understanding the varied iterations of power is crucial for movement toward an ecofeminist politics. Warren’s (1994) typology consists of five forms of power: “power-over,” creating relationships in which one party dominates another; “power-with,” creating coalitions and solidarity; “power-within,” empowering and mobilizing a group’s inner resources; “power-against,” the inverse of “power-over”; and “power-toward,” changing from one belief system to another (p. 183). It is important to note that these forms of power may be justified or oppressive, and that they may be utilized simultaneously. For example, the Ku Klux Klan working in coalition with the John Birch society utilizes “power-with,” (Warren, 1994) but with the maintenance of a consciousness based on racial inequality as its rhetorical force. In the analysis that follows, I focus on the use of “power-toward” with a materialist ecofeminist praxis to rhetorically move political consciousness toward environmental justice and democracy.

Thus, I submit, ecofeminism works hand-in-glove with critical rhetoric. Yet, with several notable exceptions (DeLuca, 1999; Rogers & Schutten, 2004; Vakoch, 2011), little rhetorical scholarship has taken it up. It may be that this apparent lack of critical rhetorical ecofeminist scholarship is the result of its most common criticism: essentialist and hegemonic assumptions
linking women/the “feminine” with nature. I believe, however, that continuing to ignore 
ecofeminism in light of this criticism is itself a hegemonic act. Negligence leaves the valuable 
contributions of ecofeminist critique marginalized, rendering it invisible within critical rhetorical 
literature. Ecofeminism, particularly its conceptions of power, can inform our engagement with 
critical rhetoric and environmental justice. Engaging GBM as a case study demonstrates the 
applicability of an ecofeminist framework to a rhetorical analysis.

Rhetorical scholars have primarily focused on Wangari Maathai’s public speeches, most 
notably her Nobel address (Kirkscey, 2007; Wolbert, 2011) or her memoir (Gorsevski, 2013), as 
well as press representations of the movement (Worthington, 2003). Like my analysis to follow, 
Gorsevski (2012) and Wolbert (2011) examined Maathai’s rhetoric across a period of time, 
rather than in a single speech event. With the exception of Worthington (2003), early GBM 
campaigns have been overlooked. Limiting my analysis to early campaigns allows for a greater 
understanding of the rhetorical tactics used to mobilize and empower rural Kenyan women 
seeking environmental and political change at a key point in the movement’s history.

The theoretical focus of GBM literature to date has largely been on the use of rhetorical 
devices in internal movement rhetoric, including narrative (Kirkscey, 2007), framing (Wolbert, 
2011) peacebuilding (Gorsevski, 2013), or external representations (Worthington, 2003) of the 
movement, to the exclusion of the materiality of GBM activism. While Maathai was an adroit 
public orator, it is the practice of an ecofeminist politics that intrigues me about GBM. Tree 
planting efforts, for which GBM is most well known, have been the subject of a documentary, 
_Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai_ (Merton & Dater, 2008) as well as several 
children’s books (Napoli, 2010; Nivola, 2008) that narrativize the movement’s efforts for a 
public audience.
Rhetorical scholars (Gorsevski, 2012; Wolbert, 2011), as well as the creators of the mediated works mentioned above, agree on the connection between feminism and environmental degradation in Maathai’s rhetoric, yet ecofeminism has been neglected. Thus, my analysis examines the Green Belt Movement for its’ material practice (praxis) of ecofeminist politics in campaigns for social and environmental change. I contend that through Maathai, GBM created an empowering space for rural Kenyan women to enact their political consciousness. In what follows, I offer my analysis of three campaigns performed by GBM: planting trees throughout Kenya, civic engagement seminars connecting environmental degradation to civic engagement, and a pro-democracy demonstration in Nairobi. For each of these actions, the capacity for “power-toward” is examined with emphasis placed on the political consciousness enacted by GBM participants. I conclude this essay with theoretical implications for rhetoric and environmental communication.

Power-Toward as Critical Praxis Across Three Campaigns

Although British colonial rule in Kenya officially ended in 1963, the legacies of imperialism posed political, economic, and environmental challenges that persisted well after independence. Urged to maintain the economic development spurred by colonial rule, Kenya, like many African countries, continued or expanded its trade in unsustainable resources including timber, charcoal, coffee, and tea (Nyang’oro, 2001). Deforestation, soil erosion, and sedimentation were direct results, instantiating migratory shifts as “men moved in search for work in the white settlers’ plantations,” (Chandler & Wane, 2002, p. 6). Upon returning from graduate study in the United States and Germany, Maathai personally observed these effects as...
well as widespread malnutrition from a Western style diet (Maathai, 2006). These environmental conditions, coupled with a corrupt political system, and a dictatorial president who frequently arrested, indefinitely detained, and tortured those suspected of democratic sympathies, made up the immediate context for the formation of GBM.

Mikell (1997) locates the impetus for many African feminist movements in this very context of oppression as post-independence political regimes across the continent “pushed women toward greater boldness in addressing the economic and political elements that determine and affect their states” (p. 5). Maathai summarizes GBM’s rhetorical 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, Maathai uses “power-toward” discourse to express how concerns of environmental responsibility were linked to issues of fair governance; an ecosystem that should be life sustaining is increasingly lifeless, and a government that should protect its people is instead brutally oppressive. Thus from the start, Maathai expresses a vision of moving toward a system more beneficial than what Kenya was experiencing in the mid-1970s.

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 degradation. As women in Africa “hold significant responsibility” for managing the family’s land, food production, gathering water and fuelwood, “they are often the first to become aware of environmental damage”

1966. She returned to Kenya in 1966 to take a position at University of Nairobi. She graduated with a PhD from the University of Giessen in 1969.
Green Belt Movement

(Maathai, 2004a, para. 12). Because of severe erosion and sedimentation, women were walking further to secure their basic needs (Chandler & Wane, 2002, p. 8). Thus, for Maathai “tree planting became a natural choice” for addressing these problems as one resource provides several ecological services (2004a, para. 14).

For each tree seedling planted that successfully matured for six months, participants earned the equivalent of 4 US cents. Representatives from the Kenyan Department of Forests met with GBM participants to teach them about planting trees and running nurseries. Maathai (2006) reports, “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). Indeed, Chandler and Wane (2002) have also found that in the context of environmental degradation in Africa, “women’s knowledge of forestry, trees and fuelwood have been ignored” (p. 8). 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 shared their new knowledge with others, and nurseries were built throughout Kenya. 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]” (Maathai, 2006, p. 133). This organic approach to facilitating the tree-planting initiative demonstrates practice of ecofeminism by GBM participants.

As Maathai explains, the tree-planting campaign was designed to empower rural Kenyan women such that “[t]hrough their involvement, women gain[ed] some degree of power over their lives, especially their social and economic positions and relevance in their family” (2004a, para. 15). Thus, the immediate exigency from which GBM emerged characterizes acceptance of domination, patriarchy, and colonialism. That the reigning economic policy of this period required the depletion of indigenous forest for planting non-native cash crops represents a continued piety to the colonial economic system which favored national trade of raw materials over local community economies (Nyang’oro, 2001, p. 220).

GBM “foresters without diplomas” (Maathai, 2006) enacted their resistance to the oppressive economic and environmental regime, practicing an ecofeminist political consciousness that empowered them to act. By planting native tree seedlings, these activists materially practice their resistance (praxis) to colonial deforestation. 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 patriarchy exemplified by the Department of Forests officials’ comments, these women violated assumptions about their ability, and worthiness, to mobilize themselves and take responsibility for sustaining their own future. GBM participants
responded to the environmental effects of a cash-crop economy and poor, malnourished people by enacting their political consciousness through “power-toward.”

Participation in this campaign represents a key step for Kenyan women to move “away from life-denying systems and relationships,” (that is, the nested oppressions of colonialism and patriarchy), enacting “power-toward” by practicing a more equitable system (Warren, 2000, p. 200). Thus, Maathai conceptualized the tree planting initiative as a tactic for making present the voices of rural Kenyan women, voices that had been previously silenced by a centuries-old oppressive system.

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, Maathai organized community engagement seminars. Through a dialogic process community members worked to “make connections between their own personal actions and the problems they witness in the environment and society” (Maathai, 2004a, para. 17). These seminars created what Chandler and Wane (2002) “indigenous gendered spaces” in which women “work, learn and share” in an effort to prioritize development and other societal needs (p. 10).

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 discussions focused on the linkages between the two issues. Facilitated by GBM staff and often Maathai herself, the seminars were structured to privilege the voices of community members, using their concerns to guide the discussion. Thus, the facilitator’s responsibility was only to
record the participants’ points, then engage the group in a discussion of where the problems come from and how to find solutions. What came to be called “the wrong bus syndrome,” referring to a historical pattern of accepting an oppressive government, became the primary analogy used to structure these discussions (Maathai, 2000, p. 41). Merton and Dater’s (2008) documentary offers a rare glimpse into the generative process 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 the “wrong bus” metaphor, symbolizing Kenya’s 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,” rather than seeing their own contribution to the problem (Merton & Dater, 2008). In this way, the seminars operate as a “forum where [participants] can express their problems” (Maathai, 2000, p. 40).

GBM’s community engagement seminars were structured to reveal participants’ role in the environmental and political issues. Through the act of public conversation, GBM participants “would come to the conclusion, we need stop the bus... let us educate each other” (Merton & Dater, 2008). By emphasizing participants’ implication in the problems their nation faced, the
“wrong bus” metaphor performs praxis by opening a discursive space for the rearticulation of political consciousness. Through interactive dialogue, the “wrong bus” metaphor re-evaluates what it means to be Kenyan, rearticulating the passive-poor-degraded Kenyan citizen, enacting instead a responsible-accountable-empowered political consciousness.

Thus, it is the process of engaging in the dialogue that demonstrates a GBM ecofeminist practice. Birkeland (1993) finds “process…as important as goals” in ecofeminist practice 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, 1994) of violence to a healthier relationship between 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). Thus, Maathai organized the seminars to foster 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).

**Freedom Corner**

African feminist scholar Gwendolyn Mikell (1997) finds that the traditional celebration of familial and reproductive tasks for African women can often be “troubling to Western feminists” (p.8), indeed appearing, perhaps superficially, as acceptance of female subjugation. Yet this would be an unfair (even, colonialist) interpretation. Many African cultures promote a nature-culture fusion, contrary to the Western nature/culture dualism, such that “[i]n general, African women’s biologically based responsibilities have tended to transcend the household and
move outward into other aspects of society and community life” (Mikell, 1997, p. 8). The pronatal aspect of African cultures can be demonstrated through symbolic use of the female body, with different traditions for separate tribes. For example, in her memoir (2006), Maathai describes the significance in Kikuyu 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.” (p. 221).

This act, though rooted in feminine embodiment, is as much political (praxis) as it is “biological.” As GBM activists utilized this tradition in a pro-democracy demonstration, they materially embodied a nature-culture fusion, adapting “power toward” to suit an African feminist framework enacting political consciousness.

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

The allied groups 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), would become a yearlong struggle between GBM/RPP participants and Kenyan police. On the fourth day of demonstration, 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.

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 of the demonstration shows several women, wearing long skirts and t-shirts, suddenly stripping and 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). Again, Maathai explains the cultural significance of this act in her memoir: “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 forcibly vacating Uhuru Park and the barricading of Freedom Corner, many women continued advocating on behalf of the unjustly imprisoned by seeking sanctuary in a nearby Catholic church. After an eleven month sit-in, nearly all of the 52 prisoners were released.

As praxis, the Freedom Corner demonstration rhetorically exposed the unjust actions of the Moi regime; that the abuse occurred in Freedom Corner is especially fitting. 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.
Rhetorically, nakedness in public protest can symbolize vulnerability, and can function as a call to witness injustice and provoke ethical and political action (Alaimo, 2010; Pezzullo, 2007). For example, revealing one’s mastectomy scar during a toxic tour “evokes strong and sensual reactions from others” while it “speaks alternative possibilities” for politics, health, and environmental justice (Pezzullo, 2007, p. 120). Further, as Alaimo (2010) suggests “naked protests” can reveal “the material interchanges between human corporeality, geographical places, and vast networks of power” (p. 15). Thus, the act of baring oneself as political action embodies praxis by creating a coexistence between otherwise distanced events (between the effects of toxins and the scars of breast cancer, for example). The Freedom Corner protestors’ bare breasts materially recast the well-known brutality of Kenya’s then-oppressive regime through an affective experience In this way, GBM demonstrators articulate new meanings for the practices of the Moi regime, exposing its brutality through the exposure of vulnerable bodies, while resisting colonial practice by enacting a traditional custom.

An important distinction should be made when considering the rhetoricity of bare breasts in the Freedom Corner demonstration compared to other uses of nudity in public protests, as GBM/RPP participants were enacting a tribal custom. Rather than an “intention to embody the ‘naked truth,’” shock, and provoke the circulation of media images, as may be more typical in contemporary protests that utilize nudity (Alaimo, 2010), the protestors in Freedom Corner acted quickly and without explicit intention of gaining media attention. This event was captured on video, and original footage is included in the Taking Root documentary (Merton & Dater, 2008), yet participants’ reflections on the experience indicate that Kikuyu tradition was the primary source of significance.
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). 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). From this perspective, the Freedom Corner demonstration represents GBM’s fullest realization of “power-toward” as what Mbaya calls a “civil society” denotes what Warren (1994) describes as a “health[y] and life-sustaining relationship” between a government and its citizens.

Thus, Freedom Corner represents the participants’ praxis, enacting their political consciousness. By “just being there” and stripping naked these women use their bodies to “enact a…message of dissent” (Enck-Wanzer, 2006, p. 189). It is evident that the other GBM campaigns examined in this essay gained the attention of President Moi, rhetorically confronting discourses of colonialism and patriarchy. That this protest was staged in a public space directly in front of Nairobi’s federal building, it was GBM’s literal “fight for a better government” (Merton & Dater, 2008).

By resisting the oppression of Kenya’s violent dictatorship, these women enact a “new form[] of consciousness in the face of lived oppression” (Enck-Wanzer, 2006, p. 176). The protesters at Freedom Corner synecdochally represent the wider Kenyan constituency, and their embodied performance exposes the need for the country to “put [its] own ideas of an emancipatory society into place” (Kelly, 1997, p. 114). In this way, “power-toward” opened the space to re-constitute not only the protestors’ political consciousness but that of Kenya as well.
Thus, the Freedom Corner protest demonstrates how “power-toward” can guide the enactment of an ecofeminist politics toward social change.

Conclusion and Theoretical Implications

Wangari Maathai was indeed a hummingbird for environmental justice, until her death from cancer in 2011. The Green Belt Movement began in Kenya with a small group 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, 1922, D2). In 2004, Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, recognizing her sustained contribution to global environmental and political change. GBM has since expanded its efforts beyond Kenya, and now includes climate change and food security in its worldwide reach and agenda.

My analysis of GBM makes several contributions to rhetorical theory: I offer one ecofeminist construct as a useful heuristic for critical rhetoric; I demonstrate “power toward” and material praxis illuminate how social movement groups re-articulate and enact political consciousness; finally, exploring GBM’s praxis adds to the expanding repertoire of environmental justice case studies from the Global South.

Ecofeminist critique operates as both a theoretical framework and a set of practices, seeking to “deform[] our attitude toward non-human nature,” or praxis (Birkeland, 1993, p. 16). In this way, ecofeminism is not dissimilar to the interventionist goals of critical rhetoric (McKerrow, 1989, McGee, 1980). Both ecofeminism and critical rhetoric share a commitment to a materialist praxis that informs activism toward social change. As this analysis demonstrates, bringing these concepts into conversation illuminates intriguing dynamics in the use of power within social movement. Each of the campaigns examined here were guided by an ecofeminist
political agenda aimed toward demystifying and dismantling patriarchal discourses that harmed both Kenya’s environment and its citizens. GBM activities like tree-planting, civic engagement seminars, and peaceful demonstrations utilized rhetorical force to open fissures in

By illuminating dynamics of social praxis, Karen Warren’s (1994, 2000) “power-toward” usefully informs my analysis of GBM. Warren’s typology can also be a useful tool for rhetorical inquiry of the ways in which power flows within and around social movements. For example, scholars interested in the creation and sustaining of social movement coalitions may find “power-with”- that is, shared power or solidarity useful. For the study of consciousness-raising efforts, the concept of “power-within” can be enlightening. Furthermore, analysis may not be limited to the study of one element of the power typology; political actors rhetorically move between several modes of power, either through time as a movement develops/shifts or perhaps in the face of a crisis. Warren’s typology is thus a valuable heuristic device.

Working as an “imagined community” (Mohanty, 1991) of ecofeminist scholars, we may fruitfully move beyond the common criticism that ecofeminism wholly accepts essentialist assumptions of an intrinsic linkage between women/the “feminine” with nature (O’Loughlin, 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). Continuing to ignore ecofeminism in rhetorical analysis simply in light of this criticism is itself a hegemonic act. Negligence leaves the valuable contributions of ecofeminist critique (and its potentiality in rhetoric) marginalized, rendering it invisible within rhetorical literature. Drawing from a range of scholars, some who identify as Western feminists, others identifying as Third World or
African feminists, showcasing GBM as a case study necessarily expands the notion of environment, opens space for alternative tactics, and celebrates the success of unlikely coalitions. Thus, that we may best come to understand modes of “symbolic transformation” (McGee, 1983), critics must have available all means of critique; if any one tool has flaws, this is no reason to throw it away, rather it is a call for sharpening and refinement.

Rhetorical analysis of environmental justice has 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 environmental justice similarly confines the movement (Pezzullo, 2001), despite brief attention to international contexts in Bullard’s (1993) influential work. Some critical scholarship has examined environmental justice as it is experienced in non-Western contexts (Sandler & Pezzullo, 2007). For environmental communication to fully exercise its ethical duty (Cox, 2007), this momentum must be maintained. Indeed, oppressive environmental practices occur worldwide; broadening our analytical scope may challenge us to re-think environmental justice it has been experienced across communities.

That Maathai structured GBM “to avoid the urge to work for rather than with...the people,” (emphasis added, Nagel, 2005, p. 3) demonstrates her commitment to empowering those who, prior to their experience with GBM, may not have fully realized their political consciousness. By participating in campaigns that rhetorically questioned and exposed environmental and political injustices, GBM demonstrators already seeking “to make changes in their lives” were given the space to rearticulate and move away from “life-denying systems” of oppression (Warren, 2000) to a rearticulated political consciousness. Wangari Maathai died on September 25, 2011, the Green Belt Movement lives on in her memory.
References


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Green Belt Movement


