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ENGENDERING AGENCY:
LITERACIES, SOCIAL ACTION, AND WANGARI MAATHAI'S
GREENBELT MOVEMENT

by

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B.A. University of Florida, 2004

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the life and work of Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai, one of the foremost African woman rhetors of our time. Wangari Maathai—founder of Kenya’s Green Belt Movement (GBM), Member of Parliament, and activist for democracy, sustainable development, and human rights—has cultivated a multidimensional literacy that has allowed her to truly understand and address the problems that post-colonial Kenyans face. Her strong solution-oriented approach has allowed her to develop and refine operation of the GBM, which began simply planting trees, to produce a worldwide organization that works for sustainable development, human rights, and environmental conservation/restoration (among many others) by attacking the roots of disempowerment and challenging participants to become the primary agents of change.

Through the overlapping lenses of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Jacqueline Jones Royster’s *Traces of a Stream*, and Filomina Chioma Steady’s *Women and Collective Action in Africa*, I trace Maathai’s emergence as a literate women in late 20th century Kenya who is able to effect meaningful social change. This examination of her life and work uncovers the convergence of literacies (academic, critical, civic, and cultural) that have created her unique worldview. Furthermore, it also examines her rhetorical construction of self through an analysis of her context, her *ethos* construction, and her mandates for action. At the heart of the study is an exploration of the GBM as an outlet of civic and environmental education. This discussion explores Maathai’s approach to civic education as well as the potential pedagogical implications of that approach in the composition classroom of the Western university.

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CHAPTER ONE: UNDERSTANDING LITERACY

For the first generations of African American women especially, literacy became a tool with which to empower themselves. It became an enabler that facilitated their abilities to operate with vision, insight, passion and compassion in making sense of their lives and seeking to improve their conditions. Symbolically their lives became literacy in action, that is, an empowered use of literacy in the interests of action, social consciousness, and social responsibility.

—Jacqueline Jones Royster, *Traces of a Stream* (61)

Many people aspire to changing the world; seldom do. Throughout her life, Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai has consistently worked to alter her reality—the reality of living in a tumultuous 20th century Kenya. She has been a spring of inspiration for the last three decades, and her career continues to flourish. Maathai has built the Green Belt Movement (GBM), an organization that has improved the lives of countless people across the globe, from the ground up. She has worked on behalf of oppressed people without hesitation in spite of immense personal sacrifice and loss. She has maintained grace and dignity in the face of adversity. Ultimately, she has cultivated a broad-based literacy within the dominant social structure of Kenya (and the world) that has allowed her to accomplish her goals on her own terms. In the face of an oppressive society bound by the remnants of colonial rule in conjunction with the strictures of patriarchy, her voice was systematically silenced. Yet in spite of these apparent disadvantages, she forged a path as a successful, educated, and progressive member of her community: an activist, environmentalist, and champion of human rights. Indeed, Wangari Maathai is one of the foremost—if not the foremost—African woman rhetors of our time.

Maathai has reached what I consider the ultimate degree of literacy. She recognizes and addresses the underlying causes of injustice and zealously attacks those causes to effect true social transformation. She is a problem-solver, an academic who ventured outside of the relatively safe confines of the ivory tower to

actively confront inequity. She is an agent—a doer, a do-gooder. She lives her life by example and refuses to falter in the face of difficulty. She embodies the type of literacy that I aspire to developing as student, cultivating as an instructor, and enacting as a citizen of the world.

Yet Wangari Maathai is a very different woman than I. She is a woman in the developing world who is straddling two very different experiences. Here, she is deeply rooted in her homeland and her traditional childhood. At the same time, however, she is anchored in the Western world and forever tied to a formal education that represents Western involvement/intrusion in her native land. She maintains a position within and outside of the dominant discourse; and, to some extent, this unique position has both hindered and bolstered her career.

The experiences of her youth in conjunction with her Western education have colored her life's work, rendering her a complex figure. Maathai came of age at the cusp of major social and economic change in Kenya, and she has witnessed the remnants of her native culture merge with Western conventions. Indeed, she experienced her indigenous culture as it blended with Christianity and British colonialism. Yet her unique perspective on (and understanding of) Kenya developed most thoroughly through her education in the United States and Germany. This hybrid cultural experience has allowed her to develop a keen understanding of her native land, especially its complex internal relations and relationship to the world. These experiences, in turn, have helped her transcend print-based literacy to develop a literacy that melds academia, culture, experience, and the civic sphere. Here, I seek to understand and analyze Wangari Maathai's unique literacy development—her embodiment of Royster's "literacy in action"—with an eye toward discerning the how and why of what she has been able to accomplish her life. By understanding the complex interaction of forces that have allowed Maathai to develop and implement a successful rhetorical voice in the public arena, I hope extrapolate from those forces a schema for understanding my students' literacy development (and my own) with respect to cultivating movement

toward greater socio-political involvement. Through this research, I seek to understand why Maathai has succeeded where so many others have faltered and failed as well as refine my pedagogical approach so that it builds a form of literacy that calls for socio-political action beyond the classroom and into the community.

Tracing Literacy Studies: From the Autonomous to the Ideological

Understanding the nature of literacy research—particularly how it has evolved over time with respect to the developing world—is essential to understanding the issues at the crux of defining literacy and what it means to be a literate person. Much of the conflict stems from the competing camps of literacy scholars, as dueling models of literacy—the autonomous and the ideological—have shaped the evolution of this field. Proponents of the autonomous model of literacy conceptualize literacy as a function that fundamentally alters human cognition. In “Writing is a Technology that Restructures Thought,” for example, Walter Ong reinforces the notion that writing has the ability to divide and separate—he effectively emphasizes the differences between the oral mind and literate mind. In this sense, oral and literate minds have fundamentally different ways of organizing the world. This view supposes that “primary oral culture keeps its thinking close to the human life world” and posits that exploratory thought—while not entirely absent from oral culture—is a “luxury” that they can not usually afford (Ong 20).

Jack Goody further expounds upon this euro-centric concept of literacy in “What is in a List?” In this article, Goody addresses the implications of list making—one of the earliest stages of graphic representation—on cognitive operations. Goody states that lists “represent an activity which is difficult in oral cultures and one which encourages activities of the historian and the observational sciences” (49). He goes on to state that the cognitive changes he observed could be indicative of differences in “modes of thought, or reflective capacity, or even cognitive growth” (50).

David Olson further elaborates on Goody's claim that print-based literacy has cognitive consequences by proposing the autonomous model of literacy in "From Utterance to Text: The Bias of Language in Speech and Writing." His autonomous model posits that a significant transition from utterance to text occurs on both a cultural and a developmental level. This transition "is one of increasing explicitness, with language increasingly able to stand on its own as an unambiguous or autonomous representation of meaning" (Olson 258). Olson states the autonomous position most succinctly in the opening sentence of his article: "The faculty of language stands at the center of our conception of mankind; speech makes us civilized" (257).

The autonomous model of literacy carries several troubling implications. Foremost, this model creates a "great divide"—it promotes the notion that essential cognitive differences exist that separate written cultures from oral ones. This divide dichotomizes human existence—it falsely separates those who have mastered print-based literacy from those who have not, the "civilized" from the "uncivilized" (Collins 76). Likewise, this autonomous model creates an environment in which Western concepts of literacy—particularly the essayist tradition that Olson celebrates—are considered superior to other forms of literacy. In this respect, the varying literacies and literate practices that deviate from the Western tradition have been long marginalized from mainstream literacy scholarship; they have been deemed unworthy of study for much of the history of literacy scholarship and much of literacy's history has been left undiscovered just beneath the surface of traditional scholarship.

The notion of the "great divide" is especially significant for women in the developing world, as they are members of three traditionally marginalized groups: women, the poor, and the "uncivilized." In this respect, third world women are placed at a triple disadvantage—they are "othered" by their race, their class, and their gender. On one hand they have been deemed uneducable based on their socio-cultural position in

traditionally oral, “uncivilized” cultures; on the other, they are systematically denied access to literacy based on social practices rooted in patriarchy and sexual division of labor.

In response to the autonomous model, scholars began to look for new more inclusive ways of conceptualizing literacy. In direct opposition to the autonomous model, Brian Street proposed the ideological model of literacy in “New Literacy Studies.” This model asserts that literacy practices are “inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society” and allows researchers to recognize “the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts” (433-4). To further reinforce the influence of power relations in this model of literacy, the term *ideology* is defined as the site of “tension between authority and power on one hand and resistance and creativity on the other” (434). Likewise, the ideological model emphasizes that an absence of literacy does not necessarily preclude critical thinking skills (437).

In “Unpackaging Literacy” Scribner and Cole provide additional evidence for the ideological model. Their seminal study of the Vai people of Liberia revolutionized study of literacy. The Vai had a unique situation in which three types of literacy existed concurrently in their culture. They used English as their official government discourse and Arabic in religious study of the Koran. However, they also developed a phonetic writing system they used only for communication among the Vai people. This writing system was taught independently outside of formal education.

Through their study of the Vai, Scribner and Cole surmised that literacy *does not* have the profound effect on cognition that previous scholars had implied. They did not find evidence of a cognitive restructuring that resulted from literacy, and they were able to begin breaking down the notion that the ability to write promotes general cognitive abilities (136). Ultimately, when viewed in light of Scribner and Cole’s research, monolithic models of writing fail “to give full justice to the multiplicity of values, uses, and consequences which characterize writing as a social practice” (Scribner and Cole 137).

Furthermore, many scholars have shifted their research away from literacy per se to focus instead on communicative practices. James Paul Gee, for example, put forth a theory of discourse communities that function within (or outside of) a dominant discourse in *Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics*. Though Gee's initial analysis of discourse communities was not unproblematic, it did place emphasis on how people communicate: who they communicate with, when they communicate, and why. Furthermore, his research also served to validate non-traditional literacies and communicative practices—literacies and practices that exist outside of the dominant discourse within social, religious, and ethnic communities.

Overcoming the Obstacles

Understanding the evolving nature of literacy studies—the shift from the autonomous concept of literacy espoused by Ong, Olson, and Goody to the ideological model of literacy that researchers like Street and Scribner and Cole have proposed—is crucial to addressing literacy among women in the developing world. However, understanding the evolution of literacy studies is only one tiny piece of the puzzle. Though the evolution of literacy study does reflect the subordination, degradation, and marginalization of non-Western literacies, it does not offer any insight into making sense of those literacies. And in attempting to make sense of these literacies from a non-Western perspective, the most pressing barrier to understanding literacy in the developing world lies in trying to establish any sort of concrete, all encompassing definitions of literacy or development.

Embarking on this study has forced me to examine my relationship with westernization, globalization, and oppression. I have raised innumerable, seemingly unanswerable questions about literacy and education in the developing world and among impoverished people; I have realized that my conception of literacy does not fit the Kenyan woman, that I can not understand her experience through the narrow lens of my experiences or education. I have reflected on my literacy development with respect to the many

advantages I have had as an affluent white woman in the 21st century. I have pondered the nature of literacy in non-Western regions and reached the conclusion that my conceptions of literacy and learning simply cannot (and will not) apply across the world; I have admitted that trying to force my understanding of literacy upon a culture that I do not fully understand risks enacting to some extent the same kinds of oppression that I so vehemently seek to overcome. And, finally, I have wondered (often tearfully) why I chose to research something with so many complexities, so many questions.

The few conclusions I have reached have not come easily; in fact, most the answers have not come at all. Rather, I have had momentary insights that I can not quite verbalize; I understand these issues—their complexity, their longevity, their seeming unfathomably—to a greater degree than many people, yet not all. This knowledge—at once knowing so much and so little—has been stifling. At some point, however, I stopped trying to understand all the nuances; I overcame my own myopia—my own fear of getting a piece of the story wrong or providing an incomplete or fuzzy picture—to begin to tell the story at all. Ultimately, the story of literacy and the figurative portrait of literacy's landscape(s) have always and will continue to be fuzzy and incomplete. Reaching these conclusions—allowing myself to not know—has helped me to move forward in my research. What follows is my best attempt to define some of the terms that I've grappled with since beginning this line of inquiry.

Defining Literacy and Development

As Alan Rogers notes in the Afterword to *Literacy and Development*, a collection of ethnographic studies edited by Brian Street, traditional models for literacy in the developing world posit that literacy must come before development and is therefore assumed to be a de facto cause of improved development. Here, print-based literacy is either a definitive bridge to social/economic development or a necessary prerequisite for developing the critical skills necessary to defeat the oppressive social and economic

structure that perpetuate underdevelopment. In this view, literacy leads to development or liberation (Rogers 2006). These notions of literacy and development, however, are problematic and raise a numbers of pressing questions; namely, whose literacy and whose development?

Literacy is most often defined as the ability to read and write, yet this definition is a site of contention in literacy research. Most people consider literacy simply the ability to read and write at a basic level—enough to meet the demands of the society. Yet those depends are ever-changing and highly contingent upon individual circumstances. In this sense, the definition of literacy is never (nor should be) static. Literacy is complex, muddy. I can not reduce it to a single definition, and I certainly do not want to. Literacy defined solely as the ability to read and write at a basic level is limiting—it stifles the many possibilities for transformation and change. I do not, however, quite know how to articulate those possibilities. As much as I do not want to buy into the literacy as power metaphor, I do believe wholeheartedly that the right kind of literacy developed through the right means of education does offer the promise of social transformation; in fact, I strongly believe that this “right” kind of literacy/pedagogy is the strongest agent of social change we have. I do not know what the “right” kind of literacy is exactly nor how we can cultivate it; and I certainly do not know how we can transfer any definition of this “right” kind of literacy across the boundaries of space and time. There is no one-size-fits-all definition of literacy: literacy is socially situated and always framed by the boundaries/limitations of a particular culture at a particular time.

Understanding development and underdevelopment is also an essential aspect of understanding how literacy takes place in non-Western nations. Here, the term underdevelopment is relatively unambiguous, referring primarily rampant poverty and staggering quality of life indicators in areas that have been subject to colonial rule, structural racism, globalization, et al. While underdevelopment remains a fairly uncontested term; the term development remains considerably more difficult to define and is often

collapsed with modernization to signify an ambiguous enhancement of industrial, political, and educational capacities to raise the standard of living. These “capacities,” however, are seldom conceptualized outside of the European/American experience. In this respect, development appears to refer to fostering the growth of nations to mirror that of the West. This schema for understanding the nature development risks reinforcing the factors—such as the legacy of colonialism and burgeoning corporate globalization—that have perpetuated underdevelopment (Rogers 212).

For the purpose of this project, however, I have defined literacy in two respects that transcend the traditional definitions. First, I conceptualize literacy not solely in terms of reading and writing, but also in terms of the development of rhetorical effectiveness. Here, rhetorical effectiveness refers not only to meeting the basic needs of literacy—filling out a job application or being able to read health information, for example—but in being able to effectively manipulate language and medium to understand and negotiate highly complex situations. Furthermore, I want to consider literacy in terms of the transmission of skills and knowledge both within and outside of print-based mediums. And, taking a cue from Filomina Chioma Steady’s *Women and Collective Action in Africa*, I define development as “sustainable economic growth that results in social and human development, and in the equitable and just distribution of the benefits of development” (11). These definitions have allowed me to begin to translate my theoretical knowledge of literacy to a context vastly different than my own in a way that (I hope) breaks from prevailing notions of what it means to be a “literate” person in the developing world.

Wangari Maathai’s life and her work reflect these definitions of literacy. She exhibits considerable rhetorical competence throughout her career as an immensely persuasive rhetor and public figure. More importantly, however, Maathai is also an instructor of civic literacy through her community education programs. Here, she has been able to help Kenyans (particularly women, but also a large number of men) develop knowledge and skills that foster agency and autonomy. While Maathai is certainly not teaching

Kenyans to read or write print, she is teaching them how to read their land as well as their relationships with the land and the government—far more valuable skills.

Wangari Maathai’s position as public figure and her prolific texts have made her a viable research subject whose life offers a glimpse into the ways that literacy, rhetoric, and social action have converged a for a woman in a developing nation. Here, I examine one woman’s experience with literacy through an analysis of her texts, primarily her memoir *Unbowed* and her chronicle *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience*. My analysis focuses on how Maathai recounts her experiences with literacy—the acquisition and use of literacy throughout her life as well as her construction of self—and also examines the potential far-reaching consequences her extraordinary grassroots movement has had on literacy (both print-based and critical) in Kenya and beyond.

Developing a Framework for Analysis

Finding an analytical lens through which to view Maathai’s work requires several levels of understanding. Clearly, as a study in literacy, the role of language—particularly print-based communication—must stand at the foreground of the analysis. Other factors, however, also require attention: the roles of literacy, development, and (rhetorical) action must converge. Here, I have adopted and adapted several existing frameworks for understanding literacy with respect to Maathai’s work. The figure below incorporates Friere’s theory of critical literacy, Royster’s theory of rhetorical competence, and Steady’s theory of collective action.

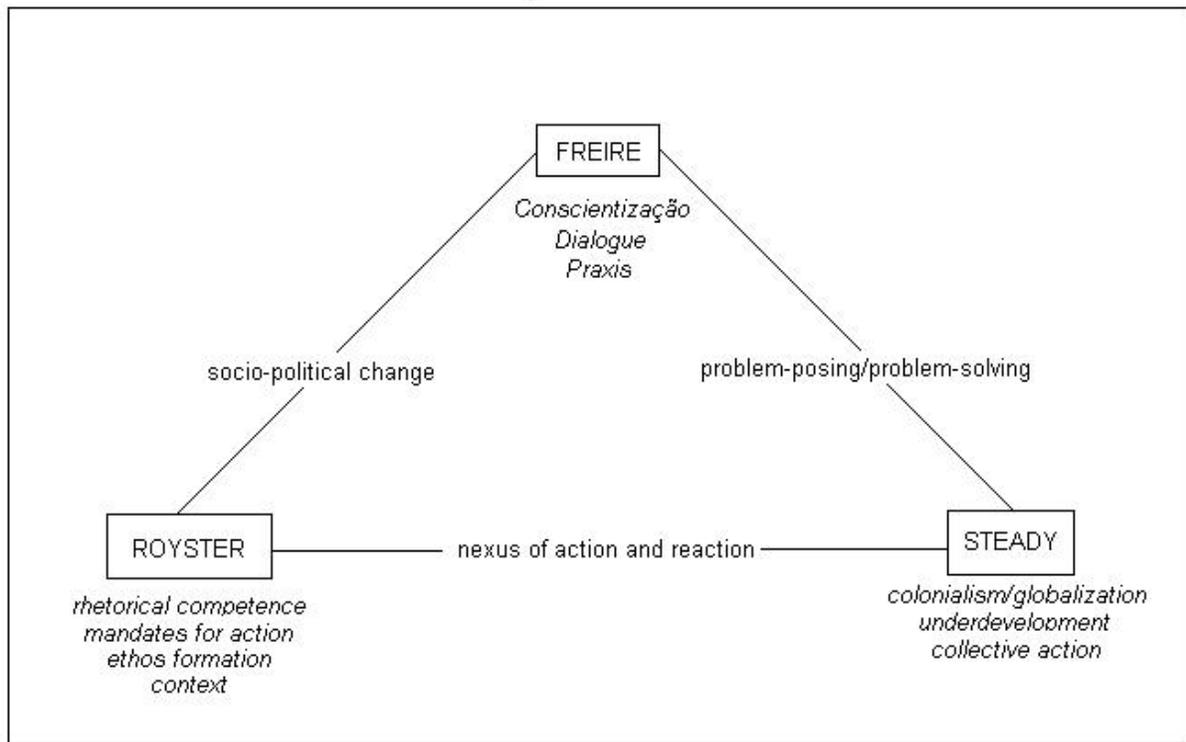


Figure 1.1 Conceptual Frame for Understanding Maathai’s Literacy Development

Paulo Freire provides one aspect of the analysis. Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a seminal text in literacy studies, posits that critical literacy developed through print-based literacy is a necessary element in freeing the oppressed from subjugation. This literacy, he believes, will provoke change in two stages. First, literacy will unmask the oppression, and then the oppressed will begin to undo the oppression through a commitment to praxis—“reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (36). A commitment to praxis will transform the reality, thus creating a new reality in which the oppression does not exist. This transformation begins when people are able to recognize oppression via paternalism and then begin to eliminate the myths propagated by false generosity. Freire dubs this process of learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and taking actions against the oppressive elements of

reality *conscientização*. In Freire's view, attaining *conscientização* is the ultimate goal, and only *conscientização* can "free" the oppressed.

Freire's model identifies the word—the basic element of human dialogue—as essential to praxis. Here, where dialogue is the essence of humanity and the word is the essence of dialogue, he sees two components at work: action and reflection. He states,

But the word is more than just what makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constitutive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. (68).

Freire emphasizes the inexorable link between naming one's world and the right/privilege to speak.

"Dialogue," he avers, "is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to make the world" (69). This analysis of dialogue uncovers the sight of tension inherent the power dimension of all human communications: some members of a given community have the "right" to name the world and others do not; those who exert the right to name the world while simultaneously denying others access to that right can never truly engage in dialogue, can never engage in praxis. Dialogue—"an existential necessity"—does not occur; neither party (both those who can speak and those who are silenced) reaches its full potential for humanity (69).

To cultivate a community in which dialogue can occur, Freire advocates a problem-posing model of education. This model—a counter to the "banking" model of education in which the instructor figuratively deposits information into the student via propaganda and/or rote memorization—calls upon educators to "abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations to the world" (60). In this respect, education occurs when students are able to think independently of the instructor, not when they are able to regurgitate information. Where a banking

education quells dialogue and reinforces authoritarianism, a problem-posing education fosters dialogue—it gives each student the authority to name his or her world and make meaning through interaction.

Freire's theories are certainly pertinent, if not foundational, to any discussion of literacy in the developing world—particularly with respect to Wangari Maathai. Maathai has clearly achieved *conscientização*, and her life illustrates a commitment to praxis. However, she did not develop *conscientização* via a problem-posing pedagogy like the one that Freire advocates; rather, her formal education predominantly follows the traditional banking model. She attended Christian schools in Kenya and then a Catholic university in the United States. Her acquisition of print-based literacy was probably not concerned with unveiling oppression or freeing her from an inherent fear of freedom. Maathai, however, has reached the apex of Freire's problem-posing model of education even though the pedagogical basis of her education was not rooted in problem-posing.

The second aspect of my conceptual frame—Steady's nexus of collective action and reaction—accounts for Maathai's high level of *conscientização* and commitment to praxis. Proposed by Filomina Chioma Steady in *Women and Collective Action in Africa*, the nexus of collective action and reaction refers to the point at which the nexus of underdevelopment-development meets the nexus of democratization-authoritarianism. Here, the competing needs of developing societies come to a crux; the stifling constraints of underdevelopment and authoritarianism—characterized by colonialism, corporate globalization, racial domination, dictatorships, and one party states—clash with the promises of democratization and development—characterized by economic/political empowerment, human development, cultural/social wellbeing, decision making, and peace building. The figure below elucidates these connections.

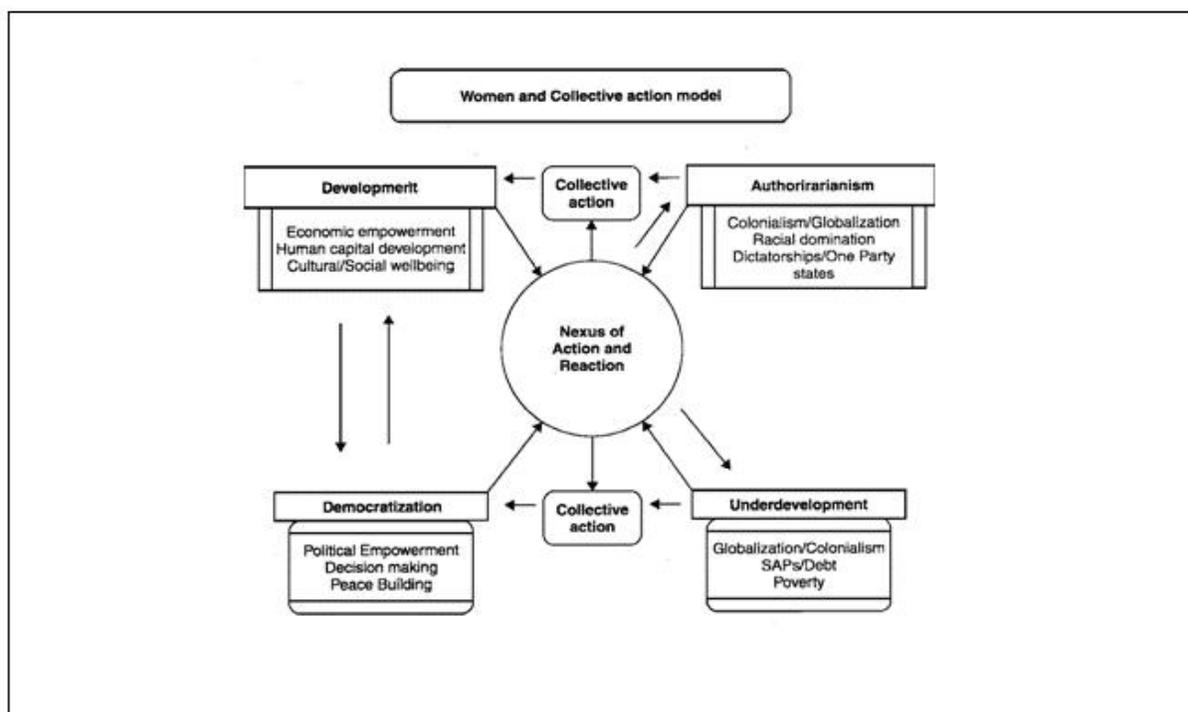


Figure 1.2 Steady’s Model of Women and Collective Action

Steady uses the nexus of collective action and reaction to illustrate the effectiveness of collective action in promoting social change in Africa, as she believes that “the tensions and contradictions” that occur where these polarities clash “promote a new social consciousness that seeks to both challenge and transform unequal relations of power” (9). Indeed, Maathai’s problem-posing education took place in this nexus of collection action and reaction. I seek to understand the emergence of Maathai’s commitment to social transformation through the lens of Freire’s theory of problem-posing education and Steady’s theory of women and collective action. Here, my goal is to decipher how Maathai’s problem-posing education took place and identify the critical moments and/or experiences that helped her develop *conscientização*.

Though Maathai was always a high achieving woman, she did not begin to challenge and transform her society until she found herself in the nexus of collective action and reaction. Here, she witnessed

degradation to the way of life she knew growing up at the foot of Mt. Kenya as a young woman. She noticed that people were suffering from malnourishment even though they lived on rich and fertile land; she noticed that her once rich and abundant homeland was becoming barren; she noticed families that were once able to live off of their land literally starving. These realizations—all indicators of underdevelopment and overexploitation—placed her within the nexus of collective action and reaction. Furthermore, as a member of her husband’s parliamentary campaign, she felt an intense impetus to stand by one of their campaign promises: to help his constituents find work. These two factors—her desire to repair her once fertile homeland and to create jobs—created a situation that forced her to develop an informal and independent problem-posing education.

As a result of this problem-posing experience, Maathai followed the trajectory that both Friere conceptualized in his pedagogy of the oppressed and that Steady indicated as a result of the nexus of collective action and reaction: she began to transform her world and challenge traditional structures of power in a way that promotes humanity. Her ultimate success in generating effective grassroots efforts to encourage sustainable development and democratization in her community, however, stems from her effectiveness as a rhetor and public figure.

To understand this aspect of Maathai’s work, I have adapted part of the analytical frame Jacqueline Jones Royster develops in *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change among African American Women*. In *Traces of a Stream*, Royster examines the social and political implications of African American women’s essayist tradition. Though I do not want to draw unnecessary parallels between the African American women’s experience and the experience of women in Africa (nor do I want to draw an imaginary parallel my research and Roysters’ historigraphic/reconstitutive scholarship), several aspects of her analysis resonated with me.

Royster's focus on the essay and her "attention to this form as a conscious act of language use that occurs in a specific time and space that results from specific processes, including sociopolitical process," seems particularly well-suited to textual analysis, as the majority of Maathai's texts are also essays in genre (23). Furthermore, Royster's attention to the relationship between language and social action also rendered her model useful. Two aspects of Royster's analytical model that connect literacy and sociopolitical action are particularly meaningful with respect to Maathai's work. First, Royster refers to rhetorical competence as a site of analysis. The term rhetorical competence, she asserts,

Suggests that writers have a base of sociocultural knowledge and language experience...which they use in the process of making meaning and conveying that meaning to others...The task of the writer is to understand the world around her to determine how she should face and negotiate literacy challenges, given her knowledge and experiences; and to determine what she should actually do to perform in a way that produces desired effects, in this case the appropriate change in thinking, perception, attitudes, and behavior. (48)

Rhetorical competence, then, is the way that writers engage in rhetorical decision-making to meet their socio-political goals. Royster points to three levels of analysis that play into the development of rhetorical competence. Here, she identifies analysis of context, *ethos* formation, and rhetorical action among the strategies for analysis of rhetorical competence. The author's context, including "the systems of power and control that operate in this context" and the "formulation of self in society," create a mandate for action and promote the "use of meaning-making strategies to carry out these mandates" (58). This understanding of rhetorical competence connects literacy with socio-political actions.

These three models for understanding the convergence of literacy, socio-political change, and collective action with respect to Wangari Maathai's life and work inform my research. My textual analysis will engage Maathai's work (primarily *Unbowed* and *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience*) through the lens of the recursive, triadic nature of these three conceptual frames. Here, I examine the interplay of her writing situation (i.e., literacy development and context) as well as her

construction of self (i.e., her formulation/use of both invented and situated *ethos* as well as rhetorical action). Furthermore, I also examine the consequences of Maathai's leadership as a rhetor disseminating a form of "literacy" through collective agency. This discussion focuses on the "foresters without diplomas" that Maathai describes—the women and men without formal educations who have worked with the GBM to employ their critical skills and develop a sense of agency at the local level. Finally, I examine the influence Maathai's literacy and literate practices have had not only in her community but also at the global level. Ultimately, I hope to draw (tentative) conclusions about her experiences as an African woman, rhetor, and activist as well as the pedagogical implications of her approach to developing critical consciousness that engenders socio-political action for the teaching of composition in the Western university.

CHAPTER TWO: COMING TO VOICE

It is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth. And it is never without fear; of visibility, of the harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgment, of pain, of death. But we have lived through all of those already, in silence, except death.

—Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action.” (21)

In “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” Audre Lorde muses on the importance of breaking silences. Here, the power to transform reality is rooted in action; action is rooted in language; silence blocks language and subsequent action. In Lorde’s schema, the ability to transform—to become an agent, to effect change—comes only after silence is broken. Yet the act of breaking a silence, of coming to voice, is not an easy task. Even Lorde did not realize the weight of her silences until forced to examine her life under a microscopic lens during a period of intense crisis: a brush with cancer that pushed her own mortality to the foreground of her consciousness. It was this intense period of introspection that brought revelation; what Lorde regretted most upon reflecting on the sum of her life were her silences. Within the frame that Lorde develops, recognizing and overcoming the barriers that perpetuate silence—our collective “fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation”—is a necessary precursor to coming to voice (20). In silence we are chained to the “tyrannies” we “swallow day by day,” and we carry these tyrannies with us until we “sicken and die of them...still in silence” (19). These fears, which ultimately amount to a fear of visibility, bind us to silence—to the status quo. But the visibility that we fear, that “which makes us most vulnerable,” is also the “source of greatest strength” (20).

This chapter examines Wangari Maathai as she comes to voice—as she transforms the tyrannies she suffers and bears witness to each day into language and ultimately action. Here, “coming to voice” refers to the “shaping point and place and medium of utterance,” the “synergy of . . . three components—rhetor, language, and culture—as they manifest in a particular location” (Miller and Bridwell-Bowles 11). Here, I trace Wangari Maathi’s crucial “shaping point” where these factors collide and her legacy begins. Along her journey in coming to voice, Maathai draws upon a toolbox of varying academic, cultural, and critical literacies that she develops throughout her life; this chapter traces her concurrent literacy developments to better elucidate the converging factors—found in a variety of snippets from literacy narratives—that fostered her emergent powerful voice. Furthermore, I also examine the role of Maathai’s rhetorical context as an educated woman in Kenya during the late 20th century. This powerful marriage of appropriate time and place (*kairos*) and the genuine need to address tyranny (exigence) exerts immense influence on her coming to voice. Ultimately, these factors allowed Maathai to overcome any fear of visibility; they allowed her not only to come to voice but to *raise* her voice and develop the rhetorical competence necessary to effect meaningful change.

Maathai’s Multi-Dimensional Literacy Development

Wanagari Maathai’s voice began to develop through the interweaving of several divergent yet complimentary strands of literacy education, and only in conjunction with each other could her literate self evolve. Here, her early education in mostly religious schools in Kenya followed by her Western education as a college student in America during the tumultuous early 1960s forms the foundation of her traditional development of print-based literacy; these experiences, however, only become profound as they converge with her early experiential knowledge (i.e., her literacy of the land) that she gained as the daughter of a farmer in the fertile Rift Valley at the cusp of major social change within Kenya as well as her experiences

addressing the serious environmental degradation that she witnessed upon her return from studying in the United States. Only the collision of these experiences—experiences wrought by a monumental convergence of time, place, access, and opportunity—have allowed her to develop a literacy both print-based and people-based, both learned and intuitive. This holistic marriage of global education and local understanding forms the cornerstone of Wangari Maathai’s rich legacy in Kenya and beyond.

To better understand the convergence of the forces that shaped Maathai’s literacy development, I trace her multifaceted experiences as a person developing traditional print-based literacy as well as a cultural literacy from early life through adulthood. Using her memoir *Unbowed* as a foundational text, I explore the ways these factors weave together to form a unified whole—how the interplay of these simultaneously competing and complimentary forces converge in Maathai’s literacy narrative¹. Ultimately, I read Maathai’s own account of her life with a critical eye turned toward picking out the factors that have allowed her to develop the type of literacy that I aspire to as a student, a teacher, and a citizen. Viewing her life through this lens has offered insight into her emergence as significant and influential figure as well as allowed me to unearth crucial moments in her literacy development—moments of insight and consciousness and recognition that have ultimately shaped her life, her career, and her influence.

Only when considered within the span of her lifetime have these seemingly discreet and possibly meaningless events begun to make sense in a meaningful way. Through examining the events of her life—the delicate balance of cause and effect in conjunction with the violent force of circumstance and free will—a pattern emerges that could offer far-reaching insight into the type of literacy education we “need” to develop to be fully literate in the Freirian sense. Indeed, I believe that understanding Maathai’s literacy development and extrapolating this pattern could provide a template for literacy development and pedagogy; perhaps the convergence of factors that have molded Maathai’s career could be replicated to

¹ All citations in the chapter are from *Unbowed*.

foster greater literacy development (*conscientização*, even) for teachers and students in the classroom and beyond.

Academic Literacy Development

Maathai's early experiences with print, including how her native culture dealt with print and other forms of print-based literacy, informs her experience as a literate person. Her first experiences with print linked them to religion and to Western conceptions of God. Because print-based literacy was introduced in Kenya by missionaries who often sought to destroy indigenous practices to give rise to Christianity and more "Western" (i.e., progressive) practices, they cultivated a literacy rooted in print; part of gaining access to the Christian world of the missionaries entailed gaining access to Christianity's most sacred text: the bible. Converting to Christianity—effectively renouncing one's indigenous culture—was a precursor to learning how to read during the generation just before she was born. Early Christian converts in Kenya were marked as separate from their native culture by their ability to read; indeed, they were even marked linguistically by this difference: they were dubbed *athomi*, which translates to "people who read" (11).

The term *athomi* means more than simply the ability to read—it also indicates an entire way of life, a culture that diverges dramatically from traditional Kenyan societies. *Athomi* culture sought to emulate the West in ways of dress, speech, and manner. *Athomis* abandoned many of their traditions and adopted a way of life reminiscent of the European colonists (12). With this change came the denigration of traditionally African ways of living; these traditions were relegated to the realm of the primitive, the backward, the demonic. As Maathai astutely notes, Africans are still struggling to overcome the legacy of this transformation, as it one of the causes that underlies Africa's lack of self-confidence in the global market.

According to Maathai this transformation of culture took place in the generation before her birth. Her parents, therefore, were *athomi*, but her grandparents were not. Though *athomi*, her parents did cling

to traditional Kikuyu practices. For example, her father was a polygamist, a practice that was not approved of by most Europeans. Furthermore, Maathai's birth took place in a traditional Kikuyu ceremony, not an austere or "sterile" European manner. Her older family members, particularly her mother and aunt, were able to impart folk wisdom through stories and rituals. Maathai mentions her aunt's stories as an outlet of "informal education" for Kikuyu children, as the stories allowed adults to transmit cultural knowledge and values to their children as well as "entertain, educate, and encourage creativity" (50).

Indeed, Maathai credits these stories with shaping many of her values as an adult; however, she was also forced to grapple with the ways that the stories she heard at home differed from those she learned at school. "The Kikuyu stories," she asserts, "reflected *my* environment and the values of *my* people; they were preparing *me* for a life in my community" (50, italics mine). The stories she learned in her formal education, the litany of Disney-classic fairy tales that Western parents rely on for child-friendly moral instruction, did not apply to her life; she read them, but they did not carry the same personal or cultural weight: they were merely words on a page subject to rote memorization that would later be regurgitated at test time (51).

In some respects, therefore, Maathai had in many ways a traditional Kikuyu girlhood—she was able to take part in Kikuyu traditions and hear Kikuyu folk stories—yet any attachment to her Kikuyu roots was tempered by the dismissal of these rites and stories by the dominant culture. Indeed, much of her indigenous culture continued to fade from everyday consciousness following her birth. This perspective, however, allowed her to bear witness to some of the changes in Africa that occurred following the onset of colonialism.

In addition to coming of age during a time when the traditional and the "modern" merged, another factor that greatly influenced her development was her birth into an *athomi* family. Her father could read and write in his native tongue, Kikuyu, as well as communicate competently in Kiswahili, the language of Kenyan commerce that he acquired traveling through Kenya. He most likely had attended school for at least

brief time. In addition to his print-based literacy, her father also had a high degree of technical literacy that rendered him a valuable employee, as he could operate and repair machinery (12). In stark juxtaposition to her father, however, Maathai's mother did not receive any formal literacy education; rather, the education she received took place in adult education classes that imparted in women the skills of household management. Here, she earned an education in domestic tasks—sewing, ironing, and agriculture—that buttressed her place in the Kikuyu home. By Maathai's account, “she never learned to read or write. Her life remained mostly rural: She cultivated crops and produced food well into her eighties” (13). Though Maathai's parents experienced literacy and education in a fundamentally different way, each of their experiences proved to be essential to shaping their daughter's literacy.

Indeed, familial support of formal education was invaluable in her early years. In one vignette, she recounts the decision her family made to provide her with a formal education. Here, her brother, who was already attending the village school, asked their mother why his sister did not attend school as well. After some thought, her mother concluded that she could not see any reason why Maathai should not attend school with her brother and made arrangements with her uncle (her father's representative) to enroll Maathai in classes. Because other female family members had received an education, this request was not altogether shocking; it was, however, not common for women to be attend school at that time. Furthermore, cost of tuition could have prohibited her from enrolling. Her mother, however, sought work outside of her domestic realm to support her education. The family's willingness to transgress societal norms—both by allowing her to attend school as well as allowing her mother to work outside of the home to support such an endeavor—were crucial elements in her literacy development. These decisions incited a chain of other events that have had a profound and lasting impact on her life. She displays a keen awareness of the ramifications these decisions have had and maintains a profound sense of gratitude toward her

mother. “How grateful I am that she made the decision she did,” Maathai exclaims, “because I could not have made it for myself, and it changed my life!” (40).

Though Maathai does not have any early encounters with encoding or decoding print, she describes her first experience with print as the most salient memory of her first day of school. In this exchange, her cousin introduces her to writing on their walk to the school house:

As we walked barefoot along the dirt path up the hill to the clearing where the primary school stood, my cousin suddenly stopped and sat down at the side of the road....“Do you know how to read and write?” he asked. “No, I don’t,” I replied. “Can you write at least?” he said, trying his best to intimidate me. I told him that I could not. I am not even sure I knew what writing was, really, but I did not want to let on that much. “Well, let me show you something,” he said mysteriously....He took out his exercise book and wrote something on it with crayon-like pencil....He then presented me with what he had written. Now, of course I couldn’t understand what he had scrawled on the page, but I was mightily impressed....He took an eraser out of his bag and rubbed out what he had written. The writing simply disappeared. I had never seen an eraser before and it seemed like magic....“This is what you will learn in school,” he intoned. (40-1).

After recounting this story, Maathai notes that it was great motivation for her; she “longed” to write and to erase. This experience—which stands at the foreground of her literacy autobiography—reflects her early awareness of the power of language, of its immense possibility for ongoing creation and revision; furthermore, this exchange with her haughty cousin fostered within her a desire to learn and a fearless approach to education. Indeed, as she reflects back on this experience, she draws a connection between her own prolific authorship and this event: “When I finally learned to read and write,” she surmises, “I never stopped, because I could read, I could write, and I could rub” (41). Here, she demonstrates a rudimentary understanding of the interconnected nature of reading, writing, and revision and the power to effect change.

Another telling event in Maathai’s account of her life is her recollection of her family’s decision to send her on to high school. Here, she recalls with the same sense of urgency and anticipation that she felt at

the time she stumbled upon her mother, brother, and cousin discussing her. With a child's knack for eavesdropping on adult conversation, Maathai struggled to discern elements of the conversation taking place; with a parent's knack for uncovering a child eavesdropping on an adult conversation, she was sent to gather water. By the time she returned, her fate—left in the delicate hands of her mother and older brother—had already been decided: she would attend St. Cecilia's—a catholic boarding school for girls (13). Once again in Maathai's life, her education was left to a roll of the cosmic dice; yet the odds—so heavily stacked against young Kenyan women—fell again in her favor.

Critical Literacy Development

Her experiences at St. Cecilia's, which was operated by Catholic nuns from Italy, continued to further build the foundation for Maathai's literacy development. Indeed, Maathai's education at St. Cecilia's was influential on several levels. Here, she received a strong Western education that prepared her for entering higher education as a student of biology. However, and more importantly, it was at St. Cecilia's that she first began to realize the importance of developing a commitment to civic ideals and improving the lives of the less fortunate. The nuns of St. Cecilia's—who functioned as instructors, foster mothers, and friends to the young women attending their institution—imparted the importance of civic engagement. Here, the students became involved in “a Christian society known as the Legion of Mary that instilled...a sense of service and the importance of volunteerism for the common good” (60). Working with this organization alongside the nuns formed the foundation of a principle Maathai continues to embody in her work today; indeed, she continues “to serve God by serving fellow human beings” (61).

In addition to her burgeoning commitment to civic engagement and improvement of the human condition, Maathai also began to realize some of the ways that colonial involvement in Kenya had rendered all things traditional inferior. Here, she notes a general movement from the child's world of “traditional

dancing, singing, and storytelling” to the adolescent’s world of “books, study, prayers, and the occasional game of netball” (60). Though this experience is common to many young people involved in formal education across cultures, the transition took on a decidedly imperialist dimension for Maathai. Here, the most dramatic change occurred in her continuing study of English. Because mastery of English was considered essential for any “serious” student, the nuns often enacted English only rules at school. When a student was caught communicating in her native language, she would be given a button inscribed with a phrase such as “I am stupid, I was caught speaking in my mother tongue” (60). The last student to receive this button, called a monitor, through the day would be punished by having to complete particularly odious chores around the school (60). Reflection upon this practice years later gave Maathai insight to the consequences of denigrating or marginalizing the use of indigenous languages, which she believes has contributed to the crippling lack of self worth and self confidence that paralyzes many African nations.

During this time, Maathai also learned how to balance her position as an educated woman with the demands of being a Kikuyu woman. She was able to simultaneously lobby for better access to education while maintaining grounded in her home life. Even as a teenager, Maathai was actively working toward improving the lives of others, and she enacted this advocacy by convincing a local priest to start a school for the children of the squatters (one of whom was her father) who worked on the land of the British man. Realizing the profound impact that formal education had on her life, Maathai helped create opportunity for other children on the homestead she grew up on.

Maintaining a commitment to her family and to her native land also emerged as a priority for Maathai as she navigated her high school years. Here, she observes,

Education, of course, creates many opportunities. In Kenya, for most people of my generation and after, a high school education or college degree is a guaranteed ticket out of the perceived drudgery of subsistence farming or the cultivation of cash crops for little return. I, too, got this ticket out, but I never severed my connection to the soil. (71)

This statement reflects a self awareness within Maathai—an awareness that renders her forever bound to serving and protecting the land she holds so dear. She has indeed remained firmly rooted in her native land, and she has not faltered when faced with situations that other members of the educated elite might find unseemly; she continued to perform the duties associated with caring for that land whether through cultivating crops or replenishing the walls of her mother’s hut with a combination of ash and cow dung (71). Her continued connection with her native land and culture fostered her future success and ultimately shaped her future endeavors.

Experiencing higher education in 1960s middle-America also exerted profound influence on Maathai’s literacy development. Maathai attended Mt. Scholastica, a catholic university in Indiana as part of the Kennedy Air Lift program. This program offered educational opportunities to young Africans following the surge of newly sovereign nations established in the 1950s. When Maathai was offered a scholarship as part of the program—one of three offered to Kenyans—her parents agreed to let her attend college in the United States even though “girls’ education was still not fully appreciated” (74). Her experiences during her college years cultivated a crucial element of her education; though her burgeoning interest in biology clearly proved to be influential (if not critical) to her career, she developed what I believe is one of the key components of her literacy: a more critical attitude toward education and authority. During this time, she was forced to confront and critique her past educational experiences and her relationship as a black woman and as an African to both the United States and Kenya. Furthermore, Maathai’s experience of American culture—especially with respect the American political system, institutionalized racism, and religion—allowed her to develop a multidimensional lens through which to view her world.

Because she was able to come to the United States via the Kennedy Air Lift, Maathai felt a strong admiration for and connection to John Kennedy. This connection to Kennedy as well as her experience within the American political sphere, I believe, helped shape her belief in democracy and respect for political activism. Almost immediately upon entering campus life at Mt. Scholastica, Maathai and other African students became involved in local Democrats' campaign for Kennedy's presidential election. Though she did not understand American politics or what it meant to be a Republican or Democrat, she entered the campaign with enthusiasm. Here, she gained a greater understanding of the power of a participatory democracy, as the candidate she lobbied in favor of was shortly elected to the land's highest office (79). When Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, Maathai "mourned him like a member of her family" and expressed a profound admiration for his leadership as "a lover of peace and a man who was very humanistic" (91). Rumination on Kennedy's assassination, which occurred several weeks before the Kenyan independence in December of 1963, and his legacy as a democratic leader surely instilled hope in Kenya's future as it emerged from colonial rule to establish its own democracy.

Learning of American racism also colored Maathai's education in the United States. Here, she was able to juxtapose slavery in the United States with colonial rule in Africa. Institutionalized racism in the United States, which was just at the cusp of the civil rights movement, was rampant; though she was not subject to direct discrimination herself, she did witness segregation and mistreatment of people of color in the United States. These inequities and injustices, which she thought could never occur in America because of its status as "land of the free and home of the brave," forced her to examine how discrimination and oppression are enacted outside of colonial rule. Ultimately, she discovered that though the legacy of colonialism in Africa and the legacy of slavery in the United States are in some respects similar, the disparities between the two nations are too great. Even the poorest conditions for people of color living in the United States looked "positively luxurious" when compared to the conditions in Kenya (87).

In addition to her evolving understanding of racial issues in the United States, several of Maathai's most significant experiences in America involved her changing understanding of the nature of religion. As she acclimated to "American" life, she realized the limitations of her previous education. She first began to question some of the values that the nuns had inculcated her with when she took note of the relationships that young men and women were free to develop in the US. Here, young couples could kiss and hold hands and dance—all actions that would have been verboten in Kenya. Furthermore, the Catholic Church also underwent considerable change as the Vatican II council attempted to update traditions to meet the needs of modern congregations by easing fasting restrictions and allowing priests to perform mass in the local language of the land rather than Latin. These changes, which turned Catholic conventions upside down, occurred simultaneously as she was entering the seemingly permissive Mt. Scholastica.

Maathai describes the experience of receiving a broad-based liberal education with considerable freedom after years of strictly ordered "Victorian" education as "liberating" but also "troubling" (81). The difficult process of reconciling these divergent experiences—of addressing the dissonance created by comparing her education (both religious and cultural) in Kenya with her education in the United States—imparted upon her an essential component of her literacy development: it forced her to ask why the conventions were changing; it forced her to ask if God had changed his mind (82). Here, Maathai, a devout Catholic, began to question that which she would have previously found infallible: God.

This period of questioning led to even more profound development. One of her coworkers invited her to a consciousness-raising event for the Nation of Islam. Because of her open mind and her curiosity regarding the peculiarities of American culture, Maathai attended the event. During the meeting, however, she became deeply bothered by "inaccuracies" that the leader was disseminating about the life of Jesus. Flustered and somewhat distraught, she called her priest from a pay phone to seek advice about her next move—should she leave the meeting or confront the speaker about his misinformation. Her priest

comforted her; he told her that it was important to listen to the views of others and expressed interest in hearing more about the meeting when she returned to school.

This conversation served as a foundational moment for Maathai. “Not only did I now have permission to listen,” she recalls, “but the mandate to speak my mind” (89). During the meeting she was able defend her beliefs even in the face of ridicule from the other participants. In many ways, the “permission to listen” and the “mandate to speak” Maathai received that day have been invaluable to her education and career. She learned that questioning the status quo—asking why things are the way they are and if they should be that way—were not only acceptable but necessary to education. She learned that turning a critical eye toward the things she had been taught would be an essential element to understanding the complexities of American history and culture as well as understanding her identify as a black African woman living in the United States. This critical stance toward official authority-based “knowledge” stays with her throughout her life: Maathi knows that the official record may not necessarily reflect the reality of the situation, and she works aggressively to reveal the “truth.” Her time at Mt. Scholastica, she notes, “nurtured...a willingness to listen and learn, to think critically and analytically, and to ask questions” that remained with her “where ever [she] went from then on” (92).

Maathai’s education in America at such a revolutionary time instilled in her many of the characteristics for which she has become so well known. “When I left the United States,” she reflects, “I was taking back to Kenya five and a half years of higher education, as well as a belief that I should work hard, help the poor, and watch out for the weak and vulnerable” (95). These experiences ultimately helped Maathai develop a keen perspective on her subject position as a Kenyan woman and the confidence to act as agent of change. One of her first acts, for example, upon returning to Kenya was reclaiming her Kenyan name—Wangari. Here, she gave up her baptismal name, Miriam, and her Catholic name, Mary Josephine, in favor of her traditional Kenyan name, the name that “should always have been” (96). Indeed,

Maathai returned to Kenya invigorated by her time in America and ready to create a better Kenya. Of her time in America, she states,

It is fair to say that America transformed me: it made me into the person I am today. It taught me not waste any opportunity and to do what can be done—and that there is a lot to do. The spirit of freedom and possibility that America nurtured in me made me want to foster the same in Kenya, and it was in this spirit that I returned home. (97)

Cultural Literacy Development

Maathai's formal education up to her return to Kenya in 1965 provided the foundations of her broad-based literacy: she developed a high level of print-based literacy both in her native language and the internationally-valued English, a finely-tuned civiv/critical literacy, and a scientific literacy. Yet these factors alone do not account for the sum of her accomplishments. Only her strong connection to her native land and nature in conjunction with her academic literacy created the unique perspective from which she approaches the problems that confront Kenya and the world. This inborn, nature-based literacy developed largely through informal means and is strongly tied to her position as a Kikuyu woman.

For Kikuyus the relationship between life and land is solidified upon birth and death. To illustrate this point, Maathai describes a birth ritual “that introduced the infant to the land of the ancestors and conserved a world of plenty and good that came from their soil” typical of Kikuyu families (4). In this ritual, the men would fatten a goat in preparation for the child's birth and women would gather vegetables—beautiful, ripe, full bunches bananas to reflect “wholeness and wellness, qualities that the community valued”; fresh sweet potatoes; and raw sugar cane—from their gardens (4). They roasted the lamb and the vegetables together, and the mother would then chew bits of each item and then put the juices in the child's mouth. Through this ritual, the child's first meal would consist of the “fruits of the local land”—a land that was known for its fertility and bounty (4). Then, upon the death of a community

member, Kikuyu blessed the dead with the incantation “May you sleep where there is rain and dew” (37). These lifecycle rituals—feeding a child its first meal from the land and wishing the dead a peaceful rest in the damp, fertile soil—reflect the omnipresence of and reverence for nature in Kikuyu culture.

Maathai’s mother, who cultivated crops all of her life, fed Maathai her first meal following Kikuyu tradition. This meal tied Maathai both to her mother and to her land, and her mother would continue to influence this bond with the land. Her mother, like most Kikuyu women, was responsible for cultivating the crops that provided much of the family’s food, and Maathai watched her mother tend to crops from implantation of each seed to the harvest each item (16). Indeed, Maathai spent many days in her youth tending to her sisters near her mother in the fields. Here, they would spend the day “playing in the soil and chattering among” themselves (15).

Many of the agricultural skills that Maathai developed came about as a result of imitating the other women in her family and her community. By imitating their tasks—gathering firewood, for example—she was able to find her place in her community; she was able to participate in what it meant to be a Kikuyu woman. “Like many African girls with their mothers,” she observes, “I saw her cultivating the soil and so I did the same” (37). Participating in the daily harvest—hard but rewarding work—gave Maathai a sense of the importance of cultivating crops on Kikuyu society. She developed an intrinsic connection between soil and life; even as a young girl she began to understand the power the land held when she rubbed the wet soil of the central highlands—“porous but still smelling fresh”—between her fingers and “could almost feel the life it held” (37).

Maathai’s mother also gave her daughter a garden and some informal instructions to practice cultivating crops. Without any formal education in growing crops, Maathai’s mother was able to teach her daughter how to successfully tend to a garden that produced maize and beans for the family. This formative

experience taught Maathai how to understand and interpret nature—life cycles, pollination, and germination—before she ever entered the biologist’s lab.

As Maathai grew older, she gained fulfillment and a sense of wholeness from cultivating the land. In particular, she attaches significance to cultivating the land in late afternoon. She reflects fondly on her experiences:

Nothing is more beautiful than cultivation of the land at dusk. At that time of the day in the central highlands the air and the soil are cool, the sun is going down, the sunlight is golden against the ridges and the green of trees, and there is usually a breeze. As you remove the weeds and press the earth around the crops you feel content, and wish the light would last longer so you could cultivate more. Earth and water, air and the waning fire of the sun combine to form the essential elements of life and reveal to me my kinship with soil. (47)

This passage indicates not only the degree to which Maathai has internalized the life-giving property of the soil but also its mystical—almost spiritual—capacities. Indeed, these associations with nature pervade her descriptions of the land.

Maathai’s description of the fig tree—which she delivers with rich imagery and elegance—embodies the life and spirituality found in nature. The fig tree—lush and full and abundant—was sacred to the Kikuyus; it is “God’s tree” (45). Therefore, the Kikuyu do not use fig trees for firewood; in fact, they do not even cut down the trees near the fig. As a child, she could not understand why this tree was sacred. Yet as an adult, she learned of the connection between the root system of a fig tree, which creates springs of clean fresh water, and the stream near the base of the tree. The stream was a source of joy for young Wangari, and she spent countless hours there playing and learning (unknowingly) about the lifecycle of the frogs. Maathai formed such a strong connection to this stream that she even made reference to it during her Nobel acceptance speech. Her community’s reverence for the fig tree, she realized, allowed them to preserve the quality of their land: the tree provided water through its stream and bound the soil to reduce

erosion. “Without conscious or deliberate effort,” she notes, “these cultural and spiritual practices contributed to the conservation of biodiversity” (46).

The interconnected strands of Maathai’s education came together. As a post-doctoral student at the University of Nairobi, Maathai began research on the life cycle of a parasite responsible for a disease that was killing cattle. During her field research, she began to notice that the fertile lands of her youth were becoming barren. Changes that had occurred since she left the land in the late 1950s—particularly deforestation and cultivation of cash crops such as tea and coffee rather than indigenous vegetation—gave way to poor soil quality and subsequent malnutrition. The stark contrast between the current state of the land and the land that she remembered as a girl was jarring: what, she asked, would cause this type of destruction and how can we fix it? Maathai’s academic understanding of biology in conjunction with her intuitive understanding of the connection between land and life gave her an interpretive frame to answer those questions. These two strands of education, however, were not enough. While her informal education cultivating crops with her mother and her formal education in school as biologist allowed her to understand the issues at hand, the confidence she developed as student in America united these threads of literacy development and ultimately gave her the tools necessary to make the crucial next move: to speak and to take action.

Maathai’s Writing Situation

As Maathai’s literacy narratives came together, Maathai’s evolving contexts for producing texts (oral, written, symbolic, etc.) occurred in succession, each building upon the next and ultimately leading to the development of authority and the rhetorical competence that allowed the formation of the Green Belt Movement as well as its growth into the organization it has become today. Her ultimate success as a rhetor hinges upon two factors: construction of identity and introduction of opportunity. Here, the convergence

of subject position (both self-constructed and socially imposed) with circumstance allowed her to speak with authority at the opportune moment. The following analysis traces several of the factors influential to her identity construction as well as delineates the three most significant kairotic moments that offered her the opportunity not only to come to voice, but to raise her voice.

Construction of Identity

Maathai embodies a complex discursive position that is characterized by duality, multiplicity, and contradiction. Here, biological sex underlies one facet of her personhood. While the biological and social significance attached to gender does shape Maathai's identity construction to some extent, other factors are equally influential. Indeed, the dueling nature of her dual experiences—of her Kikuyu childhood and her “Western” entrance into adulthood, of the two worlds that she simultaneously inhabits—exerts considerable force on her construction of identity, especially as these factors converge with issues of gender.

Wangari Maathi defies rigid categorization. She is an “Americanized” Kenyan, but also a Kikuyu. These national and ethnic identity dimensions both marry her to and separate her from a continuum of communal experiences. She understands the Kenyan cultural experience from a distinctly Kikuyu perspective; she had been Americanized by her education but will never truly know America. Politically, she has experienced the oppression of British colonialism as an indigenous Kenyan born in the Rift Valley, the excitement of American democracy as a Kenyan in early 1960s America, and the promise of Kenyan independence as a young educated person returning to a very different homeland than the one she left five years before. These experiences foster a sense of sameness and of otherness. Furthermore, as a self-described “independent” urban woman living in Nairobi, she had not severed her roots to the rural collective community she grew up in. Here, her national and ethnic identities have forced to her continually

examine what it means to be within or outside of the dominant social structure in a given community; indeed, these facets of her identity have revealed the inequities that Maathai fights so fervently to defeat.

Furthermore, Wangari Maathai is also deeply enmeshed in roles typically considered both masculine and feminine. In the private space of the home she is a wife and a mother, all of the things a woman in Kenya should be. But she also inhabits a very visible role in the public realm as a successful faculty member at the University of Nairobi. Here, her varying roles are described in uniformly masculine terms: she is doctor, a scientist, a professor, a scholar. In both her roles at home and in the university, she must constantly (consciously or unconsciously) push against the prevailing notion of what it means to be a “Kenyan woman” or “a woman professional,” as the home and office were still rather rigidly defined gender spaces in Kenya during that time. In this respect, she had to transgress, subvert, and redefine the ways that her multifaceted societal roles were perceived. Her physical embodiment of these varying roles was, therefore, somewhat stilted. Her early professional and public life remained tempered—and perhaps somewhat subdued—by the lingering veil of Kenyan womanhood, of the fear of too boldly transgressing gendered boundaries. Here, upon reflecting upon the retraction of her first job offer, she states, “Both ethnic and gender barriers were now placed in the way of my self-advancement. I realized then that the sky would not be my limit! Most likely, my gender and my ethnicity would be” (101). These moments of harsh realization illustrate the reality of the gendered and ethnic barriers that Maathai had to overcome professionally and account for internally.

Maathai’s position as an educated person more than her position as gendered or ethnically marked entity figure most prominently into her identity construction; indeed, these factors, I believe, ultimately contributed most heavily to her emergence of voice. It was, after all, her scientific understanding that allowed her to make sense of her gendered and ethnic experience. Her position as a scientist—a doctor of biology with extensive experience teaching and working in the field—imparts a sense of empirical distance,

a distance that would not render her cry for action a mawkish reaction hungry children or a ploy to improve the lot of “her people” (the Kikuyus). Foregrounding her position as a scientist while allowing her gendered and ethnic identities to function (more or less) silently in the background helped her develop the authority to speak.

Introduction of Opportunity

At this point, Maathai had developed her authority to speak, but she lacked impetus. A succession of events in her life, however, offered ample opportunity to speak about that which she was passionate—to overcome her fear of visibility (i.e., of too overtly transgressing gendered boundaries) and come to voice. She first developed and used a public voice speaking and campaigning on her husband’s behalf. In this situation, her *kairos* was the election and the democratic fervor that was sweeping Kenya in its early years of independence. Her exigence was the desire to get her husband, Mwangi Mathai, elected and the belief that he/they could make a difference in Kenya if he became a member of parliament. Clearly, her purpose was to get him elected—to gain votes from the district where he was running. Her audience, therefore, were members the district; this group consisted of mostly poor rural people who were suffering from a variety of ills associated with underdevelopment/exploitation of resources. During this time she spoke on the campaign issues that she hoped would sway voters. Some of these issues included improving living conditions for rural families and generating employment opportunities. Though this event established the foundation for the rest of Maathai’s rhetorical career, it was a relatively “safe” place for her to speak. She remained firmly behind her man. Her goals were their goals, but her voice was not yet her own.

As a new instructor at the University of Nairobi, Maathai encountered a more significant situation that called her to speak. Because of unfair practices that she witnessed at the university, she lobbied for equal treatment of female employees of the University of Nairobi, as women were denied access to the

generous benefit packages that male employees received. During this time she campaigned for equal rights and fair labor practices. Here, the timeliness of this discourse lies in the fact that she and Vertistine Mbaya, Maathai's most trusted colleague and lifelong friend, were the first female staff members in their department and that very few women were faculty members in any department at that time; because they were some of the first women faculty, and perhaps because they had each other to validate the inequities between their positions in the university and the positions of their male colleagues of equal and/or subordinate status, the time was appropriate to open a discussion of gender equality. Furthermore, both Maathai, who was educated in the United States during the beginning of the women's movement, and Mbaya, who was an African American living and teaching in Kenya, had witnessed the relative success of women's efforts to gain equal social status in the United States. Also, the benefits that were afforded to the male faculty were remnants of the colonial system, which should theoretically have been dismantled in a post-colonial era.

Maathai's exigence here is twofold: to improve her own life as well as the lives of future female faculty members and to establish women as independent professionals in their own right. Her audience consisted of the University administration; the highest member of the University was the president of Kenya, who was also the chancellor of the university. Her purpose was to persuade the administration to offer equal benefits to *all* faculty members regardless of their gender or marital status. This situation was the first in which Maathai "talked back" to oppressive elements; and, indeed, it was her first experience transforming her reality: at this point she was able to transform silence (regarding issues of gender discrimination) into language (by campaigning verbally and in writing) and action (by taking the university to court). This context for producing text and effecting change gave Maathai insight into the power of language for shaping reality and formed the cornerstone of her career as an activist.

CHAPTER THREE: RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF SELF

WW: With everything you've done you don't say, "I am going to do this." It's always "we." That's refreshing.

Once you work in a civil society you know. I am very conscious of the fact that you can't do it alone. It's teamwork. When you do it alone you run the risk that when you are no longer there nobody else will do it.

—Wangari Maathai, "An Interview with Wangari Maathai," *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (138)

Following her success working for fair labor practices, Maathai's journey to voice and subsequent action reached fruition: she started Envirocare, a precursor to the GMB, following her husband's election to Parliament in 1974. Maathai formed Envirocare primarily to create work for her husband's constituents by hiring the rural members of the district "to clean up the homesteads of residents... as well as plant tree where necessary"; in addition to creating employment, however, Maathai also hoped that Envirocare would bring disparate members of the district together. Here, Maathai's context for formation of Envirocare as well as its ultimate transition into the GBM hinged on a convergence of *kairos*, exigence, and audience. Indeed, her *kairos*—the environmental degradation she witnessed in her field research and her campaign promise to create employment made while working on her husband's behalf as well as emerging global attention to environmental issues—in conjunction with her exigence—her empathy for the very real issues affecting rural people as well as her understanding of the need to address these issues rooted in academic, cultural, and critical/civic literacies—necessitated action. Her audience of mostly impoverished rural men and women, however, was not ready for Envirocare; rather, they relied on Maathai to be responsible for all aspects of securing their employment and payment; the company subsequently buckled under this pressure and was unable to generate enough income to support itself or genuinely improve the lives of the people

who were suffering the consequences of a degraded environment (*The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* 13).

Though Envirocare did not succeed in the form that Maathai had envisioned, its failure ultimately facilitated the success of the GBM. The convergence of factors that engendered formation of Envirocare solidified Maathai's "mandate to speak" on environmental issues as well as the linkage between language and action in her life; indeed, the formation of Envirocare and its evolution into the GBM has had far reaching consequences throughout the world. By the time Maathai started Envirocare she had both the authority and opportunity to transform silence into language and action; however, having the opportunity and authority did not necessarily ensure her success. Rather, Maathai's success as a rhetor, and by extension the success of the GBM, lies in her construction of *ethos* and her rhetorical action.

In *Traces of a Stream*, Royster asserts that *ethos* construction is of utmost importance to the emergence of rhetorical competence among female African American essayists. For Royster,

African American women are called upon to find ways to present themselves in textual spaces as intelligent, well-informed, well-meaning people of character who *should* speak, who *should* be heard, and to whom audiences *should* respond. They spend time in their texts, therefore, acknowledging in one way or another perceived rhetorical distance, and crafting carefully a consubstantial space that permits multiple opportunities for ears, hearts, and minds to be inclined in their direction. (65, italics mine)

In Royster's analytical model *ethos* construction is a key element in the rhetorical effectiveness of African American woman essayists; indeed, their *ethos* construction, to some extent, generates their sense of authority. They are "called upon to define themselves against stereotypes and other expectations, and thereby to shift the ground of rhetorical engagement by means of their abilities to invent themselves and create their own sense of character, agency, authority, and power"; only after "they have crafted 'identities' for themselves as writers and for their audiences in space and time, they can proceed to make their cases...in ingenious and often eloquent ways" (65). Here, African American women use their deliberate

construction of *ethos* to push against the dimensions of unequal distributions of power and status—found in their “race, gender, class, cultural origins, and language (among others)” (65)—that systematically deny the legitimacy of their voices. *Ethos* construction is, therefore, the basis from which African American women essayists develop rhetorical success—the way that they “write themselves into the discourses of humankind” (70).

Though Maathai does not fit neatly into the group that Royster analyzes, *ethos* construction is equally crucial to understanding her success as a rhetor and an activist. Without implying that the experience of one Kenyan woman is some way analogous to the experience of African American women, I see areas of overlap between the discursive positions that Royster’s essayists and Wanagari Maathai inhabit. Maathai was clearly operating from a traditionally subordinate social position, and she had to deliberately craft herself as someone “who *should* speak, who *should* be head, and to whom audiences *should* respond” much like Royster’s subjects. In this respect, *ethos* construction is foundational to Maathai’s success.

Related to *ethos* construction, rhetorical action also stands at the center of Maathai’s effectiveness. Rhetorical action allows rhetors to “transform the world they perceive into the worlds they desire through the use of language” (Royster 70). Royster explicates this notion further; she states,

In the space between the perceived world and the desired worlds is a hermeneutic problem space, in which there are opportunities for individual writers to use language in a variety of literate act: making problems visible; clarifying and amplifying imperatives; establishing more useful terministic screens or interpretive lenses; maintaining a sense of mutual interest or a common ground; negotiating and mediating differences. All these literate acts can be categorized as participating variously in the creation of . . . a space for the conversion or subversion of interests, for the affirmation of new horizons, and for the facilitation of changes in attitude, behavior, or belief. (71)

Royster asserts that the women in her study value experience as a source of knowledge, credibility, and “truth”; they, in turn, articulate this experiential understanding of the world through language use that engenders action (72). This understanding of rhetorical action—with its emphasis on the troubling space

between perception and reality—makes sense with respect to Maathai’s work. Here, much of her knowledge—that which has moved her to action—is derived from experience; she relies on rhetorical actions like the ones Royster has listed above to “build bridges . . . with persuasive intent in the interest of rebalancing reality and creating a better world” (72).

Ethos Construction: Crafting Credibility

Maathai’s construction of *ethos* is perhaps her strongest point as a rhetor. Here, she has been able to cultivate a strong sense of good character and astutely manage public perception of her character. In terms of her invented *ethos*, the aspects of her character that she deliberately crafts through her rhetorical choices (both in words and in actions), she constructs her persona along the three Aristotelian dimensions of good *ethos*: a strong moral character, intelligence, and goodwill. In *Unbowed*, for example, her prose continually reinforces the strength of her character along these strands of *ethos* development. With respect to her situated *ethos*, the aspects of her character drawn from her audience’s perception of her character and/or her power relationship with the audience (Crowley and Hawhee 167), she maintains a strong rhetorical position by controlling public perception of the varying and sometimes competing roles she plays in a situation through a keen awareness of her social position and audience expectation. In this chapter, I investigate Maathai’s *ethos* construction in further detail with an eye toward identifying the most successful aspects of her *ethos* development in cultivating a strong and persuasive rhetorical self.

Invented Ethos: Maathai’s Formulation of Character

The strongest aspect of Maathai’s *ethos* construction lies in her invented *ethos*. Throughout her work, but particularly in *Unbowed*, she develops a sense of good character by displaying a wise and sage-like persona, an unyielding optimism and perseverance, and a strict adherence to her principles even at great

personal cost. Furthermore, she exhibits her intelligence by highlighting her education, contrasting the Kenya she knew as a child to the one she experienced as an educated adult, and by effectively making connections between the causes and effects of the dire situations that Kenyans face. Finally, she establishes goodwill by displaying a connection to people—by placing the best interest of others, especially those in an underprivileged/undervalued socio-economic position, at the heart of all her endeavors. Her successful manipulation of these elements is crucial to her success as a rhetor.

Exemplifying Virtue: Wisdom, Optimism, and Adherence to Principle

Exemplifying virtue through wisdom, optimism, and adherence to principle is one of the most persuasive aspects of *Unbowed*. Throughout the narrative of Maathai's life, she is able to hone in on moments of insight and reflection. Through her reflection on these moments, she is able to reveal the “truths” of our collective human experience and place herself within human context. Her recollection of and rumination on these experiences establish her humanity and connect her to others, but also set her apart as an individual unfettered by the single most crushing obstruction of action: fear. These moments reflect the very best aspects of Maathai's character, the ones that are the most difficult to embrace on a day-to-day basis.

Maathai continually uses moments of reflection upon her life and her position to establish a sense of wisdom. Though her moments of insight at times border on cliché, she manages to convey genuine realities that most people can recognize in their own lives. Two of her most salient moments of insight refer to her relationship with her father and mother. In the first vignette, she recounts her father's physical strength and his towering size—the characteristics that Maathai associated with him most prominently—as well as the awe she felt toward him as he bent down to touch her on her forehead. She then compares the image of her father's physical strength in her youth with his diminished physical capacities at the time of his death. The

dissonance created by these two images of her father so deeply ingrained in her psyche force reflection on mortality and the fleeting nature of physical strength. Here, she muses,

In his prime my father seemed like a mountain to me: strong, powerful, invulnerable, immovable. Many years later when he got old and sick with cancer of the esophagus and could hardly move, that fantastic picture of him would come back. It helped me understand how wonderful it is to be healthy and able to move, how quickly these youthful years pass, and how vulnerable we are. (*Unbowed* 21)

Though this recollection is perhaps a bit trite, it connects the reader to universal experiences: the process of aging, the experience of watching those we love deteriorate physically and/or mentally, and the recognition of our own mortality. However, where many people would find fear of aging in watching the image of a “mountain-like” figure become weak and feeble, Maathai finds joy in her present state—in her good health and ability to move freely. This ability to find the bright side of dark situations remains consistent throughout her memoir.

Another significant moment of reflection occurs when Maathai recounts an experience that had profound consequences in her life. Here, she describes a situation where she stood in the middle of the room singing Pentecostal hymns as her mother cleaned the hut silently around her. After her mother left, she contemplated her mother’s silence when confronted with inconsiderate and disappointing behavior. This contemplation led to the revelation that she had put her immediate gratification—a mere whim—before her mother and before her household. Her mother’s tacit disapproval, she asserts, taught her a monumental lesson: it taught her “to question [her]self and assess [her] actions and then do what is right” (*Unbowed* 22). This moment, much like the moment above she describes with her father, connects her to the fundamentally human experience of not always thinking about the consequences our actions have on others; more importantly, however, she chose to redress her own lapse in judgment by pausing more often to question whether her actions met her own expectations. She was also able to draw inspiration from her

mother's "contentment and composure"—traits typically valued by a society—and strive to embody those traits as she "inevitably accumulated" her own share of disappointments (*Unbowed* 22).

Another influential account that shapes her *ethos* involves her mother's extended stay in the hospital when Maathai was young. During this time, Maathai elected to stay home and tend to the land rather than visit her mother in the hospital every day. While she wanted to see her mother during recovery, she also wanted to ensure that the important work at home remained constant—that the land would continue to provide abundant food even though her mother was not there to tend to it. She planted and planted and planted while her mother was away, which caused people to marvel at how much she could accomplish in such a short time.

She did not realize the full weight of this marathon planting, however, until she returned months later when it was time to harvest the crop that she had planted during her mother's illness, kidney beans. After a day of harvesting the beans, she loaded one unwieldy sack on to the back of her borrowed donkey and endeavored to carry one sack on her own. Because of their fatigue and the onset of darkness, the donkey slipped down a hill. Unhurt, she gathered the fallen beans—her own as well as the donkey's—and they continued on their journey back to the farm. Upon reaching the farm, her mother exclaimed that she "never expected" her to carry such "enormous sacks of beans" by herself, and chastised her (as mothers often do) for attempting take on more than she could realistically handle. Once again, Maathai uses this experience to encapsulate one of the principles that has driven her success: her perseverance. "That incident," she states, "has remained with me through the years and reminds me that while it's perhaps sometimes foolhardy to take on something that's too big for you, it is incredible what you can achieve if you are single-minded enough" (*Unbowed* 49).

Though Maathai creates a number of moments in her memoir that offer snippets of wisdom, perhaps the most touching is her recollection of the day she realized that her husband had left her. During

this time, she was forced to examine her own life and her own actions with respect to the end of her marriage. Here, she first recalls the day that her husband moved out of their home—how the realization that their living space, the home they built with their children, had been stripped of his presence. She recalls her shock as she tried to make sense of his departure, her struggle to put the pieces that led to the separation together as she examined their joy and their pain. Where many people would crumble upon their mate’s separation, Maathai took action. As her inner world swirled in chaos, she exerted control over her physical environment: she cleaned. As she finished cleaning and was forced again to confront the reality of the situation, she made a pact with herself: “I will accept,” she vowed, “Whatever will be, will be. I have a life to lead” (*Unbowed* 141-42).

Her pact with herself is a pivotal point in her *ethos* construction. This moment connects several points of her character development and unites her wisdom, optimism, and perseverance with her intelligence. First, she openly exposes the experience of her divorce, a collective experience that binds men and women and children everywhere. This frankness about her divorce reveals a level of her humanity—it shows readers that her life is anything but perfect in spite of her outward success. Furthermore, she reveals her innate wisdom and outward intelligence in analyzing the underlying reasons for her divorce: the complex inversion of gender roles that occurred in her household. Here, she plays dual roles: wise relationship guru and keen interpreter of her own relationship. As she muses on the evolving nature of human relationships, she surmises that

When we go through profound experiences, they change us. We risk our relationships with friends and family. They may not like the direction we have taken or may feel threatened or judged by our decisions. They may wonder what happened to the person they thought they once know. There may not be enough space in a relationship for aspirations and beliefs or mutual interests and aims to unfold. For a couple, this is particularly so because most people marry young and are bound to grow and change in their perceptions and appreciation of life. This is probably what happened with Mwangi and me. (*Unbowed* 139)

Upon reflecting more deeply on the end of her relationship, however, she is forced to confront the apex of the issue: her role as an educated and successful woman in a society that did not foster either the education or success of young women. She realized that her husband saw her “through the mirror given to him by society rather than through his own eyes,” and, unfortunately, Maathai’s American education had not taught her that “men would be threatened by the high academic achievements of women” like her (*Unbowed* 139); indeed, she remarks, “Nobody had warned me that—and it had never occurred to me—that in order . . . to survive as a couple I should fake failure and deny any of my God-given talents” (*Unbowed* 140). Rather than effacing her education or trying to conform strictly to the portrait of a good Kenyan woman—rather than silencing and/or losing the voice that had come to fruition so cogently—she made a decision to stand by her principles no matter the cost. The manner in which Maathai characterizes the beginning of the end of her marriage is paramount to her *ethos* construction; here, she experiences a litany of emotions—pain, loneliness, suffering, loss, anxiety, fear, and self-doubt—but she is able to transcend these emotions; she is ultimately able to put aside her immediate emotional response by keeping her attention on her greater goal: continuing to improve the lives of Kenyan men and women through promoting sustainable development. This seminal event brought together the three strongest areas of Maathai’s construction as a virtuous member of society characterized by wisdom, optimism, and principle.

Demonstrating Intelligence: Contrasting Kenya(s), Making Connections

One of the primary ways that Maathai has been able to develop a sense of intelligence in her writing and other work is her attention to the ways that Kenya has changed since her childhood. Though these changes seem so commonplace at face value—because, of course, every society changes over time—it was Maathai’s ability to recognize and name the changes that allow her to develop a sense of genuine intelligence. Here, Maathai juxtaposes the Kenya she knew as a young woman with the Kenya she witnesses

as an adult. References to the sad changes that occurred in Kenya pepper her work, as she often (and quite purposefully) draws the reader's attention to the ways that her homeland has deteriorated environmentally, socially, and culturally. Maathai follows a sort of template for revealing the disparities between past and present: first, she describes a particular memory from her childhood—picking berries in a local field, for example—and reminisces that it was a happy, memorable, or meaningful event she had as a child; then, she follows with the grim reality of Kenya's current situation—the reality, following the earlier example, that the berries she used to pick so joyfully no longer exist due to over-cultivation of land. This method of exposing changes in Kenya gives the reader a sense that Maathai has lived the changes; in this respect, therefore, she has the necessary background to call attention to the issues she recognizes.

She also displays a keen sense and understanding of Kenyan history, and this sense of history also plays a role in the development of her *ethos*. Here, because Kenya's issues—ranging from the ecological to the social—are so deeply enmeshed in Kenya's complicated history, understanding the political and cultural changes that had occurred within Kenya is essential to understanding the state of Kenya today. Maathai understands this crucial element and accounts for it in her work. In her memoir, for example, she includes brief histories of Kenya through the early portion of the text and then uses important political events to punctuate to the events of her life. She develops her *ethos* in this respect by not trying to sugarcoat Kenya's less than glamorous past; furthermore, she gives readers, who perhaps had not been exposed to ANY of Kenya's history, the necessary background to understand the issues facing the country as well as how Maathai fits into them.

Following her experiential understanding of the changes in Kenya, she also develops her rhetorical stance as an educated individual: a scientist above all. This aspect of her *ethos* development is most prominent in her book *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience*. Here, she outlines not only her educational achievements at the beginning of the book, but she also delineates her involvement

in women's organizations other groups that had been working to promote sustainable development in Africa. Highlighting these experiences strengthens her *ethos*; her consistent attention to and involvement in issues relating to development strengthens credibility by giving the audience a sense that she has the necessary background academically, personally, and professionally to lead the GMB. Much like the interweaving strands of her literacy development, Maathai uses the three types of literacy she cultivated in her youth to strengthen her *ethos* as an adult. Here, she relies on a combination of experiential knowledge of the land and academic knowledge of science coupled with critical and civic literacy to present herself as a person who truly understands the nature of Kenya's problems and is willing to take action against the oppressive forces in her society.

Achieving Goodwill: Collective Experience, Audience Closeness

Maathai also fosters a sense of goodwill toward her audience throughout her work. Here, she foregrounds collective experience of not only Kenyans but all people; furthermore, she also encourages audience identification throughout her writing. Two examples from two diverging texts—her memoir *Unbowed* and her chronicle of the *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience*—stand out as key ways in which Maathai has been able to emphasize the collective experience to foster a sense of goodwill. The first example, which occurs in *Unbowed*, describes Wangari's experience working with the mother's of wrongly imprisoned men. During this time, she crusades alongside the other women even though she is not affected by the issue directly. However, she understands that the women's pain and suffering is connected to the breakdown in the democratic process in Kenya; she also understands that these women need a degree of guidance in making their presence known, and she feels that it is necessary to help them establish a forum in which they can make their concerns/demands known. This act reflects the selfless

nature of Maathai's work: it shows readers quite plainly that the good of her community—and the world at large—comes before her personal gain.

A second example Maathai's construction of goodwill via collective identity/gain occurs in her *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience*. Though *The Green Belt Movement* is a considerably more "dry" text, the way that she has chosen to structure the text enhances her *ethos*. Here, the values the GBM embraces all reinforce the collective nature of the organization that Maathai organized from the ground up. For example, these values—which include "self and community empowerment," "volunteerism," and a "strong sense of belonging to a community of Greens"—reflect the stake that the community has in the organization (33). Furthermore, she also foregrounds the community in her discussion of the lessons she has learned. Here, she places emphasis on tailoring a specific project to the needs of that community and knows that the community must understand and "own" the project for it to be successful. This lesson learned—akin to knowing one's audience—allows her to construct a people-centered model for community involvement. Finally, she also provides the ten-step process for starting a chapter of the GBM as well as information about Greenbelt Safaris. Providing this information allows her to open her program to wider involvement on a global scale; she gives the reader access to the GBM as an organization. Through opening these gates—by giving readers the ability to bring the GMB into their area or embark on a safari—she gives the global community the tools to (begin to) participate in the organization or at least further its goals. Through these two discrete examples, she reinforces that the goals that she is working toward and the things she is fighting for—such as ending gendered and ethnic oppression, creating sustainable development in underdeveloped/ overexploited areas, and promoting democracy—are all aimed at improving not just Kenya or the status of women, but the global community. Her goals, therefore, are aimed at creating a fair and equitable distribution of resources and power in a larger context;

she has the best interests of the global community at heart. Her *ethos*, in turn, is strengthened by the apparent concern she extends toward all people.

In addition to focusing on the collective throughout her work, she also makes a key rhetorical choice that strengthens this aspect of her *ethos*: she opts to use the often shunned second person in her memoir. This choice is one of the most important ways that she develops audience closeness. Consistently using the second person, directly referring to the reader as “you,” draws that reader into her prose. Rather than providing a strictly chronological account of her life, she invites the reader into her world: she places that reader in the experience of being a young Kenyan girl. In one particular passage, Maathai uses the second person in a way that would make many English teachers shudder: “These experiences of childhood,” she states,

Are what mold us and make us who we are. How you translate the life you see, feel, smell, and touch as how you grow up—the water you drink, the air you breathe, and the food you eat—are what you become. When what you remember disappears, you miss it and search for it, and so it was with me. (*Unbowed* 52)

Here, Maathai juxtaposes both the first and the second person, referring to the communal “we” and the individual “me” as well the other “you.” This use of grammatical person creates a sense of closeness with Maathai’s experience and subsequently strengthens her connection with a diverse audience.

Situated Ethos: Maathai’s Control of Character

The above examples clearly indicate that Maathai has a strong innate sense of how to construct her *ethos* in varying rhetorical situations. Indeed, she has been able to cultivate a sense of her virtue and moral character, intelligence, and goodwill by employing techniques to strengthen her *ethos*. But because of the demands of being a successful and highly educated woman in Kenya,

she has also has to rely on her situated *ethos* within a global community and within Kenya. However, in the global community, her situated *ethos* is able to stand on its own: she is, indeed, a doctor of veterinary medicine, a Member of Parliament, and a Nobel Peace Laureate (among many other accolades). These qualifications—aspects of her situated *ethos*—are more than able to strengthen her character and credibility in most Western contexts; however, in Africa they detract from her *ethos*—they distance her from the ideal of the “good Kenyan woman.” In Kenya, her position as an educated woman is in many ways detrimental to her *ethos*. Here, she is deemed “too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn, and too hard to control” (*Unbowed* 146). In this respect, the success of Maathai’s *ethos* construction with respect to her situated *ethos* lies in her ability to control audience perception of her character.

One of the ways that she controls perception of her character is through always keeping the ideal of the Kenyan woman in the back of her mind through her career in the public. This amounted not to changes in her character, but modifications in behavior and appearance. For example, she altered her way of dressing during her husband’s campaign. Here, she realized that tailored A-line dresses and coiffed hair she had come to embrace during her time in the United States would not be suitable along the campaign trail. In fact, she credits her husband’s campaign with shaping the style for which she is known. Furthermore, she also had to create a certain distance from her position at the University of Nairobi. In entertaining guests, for example, she often took great measures to ensure they were not able to gossip about her household by serving guests food before ever entering a conversation. And she also emphasized her ability to communicate in her native Kikuyu, Kswahili, and English. By playing up these aspects of her situated *ethos*—and demonstrating her understanding of her position as an African woman—she

was able to strengthen her *ethos* with respect to audiences who would have otherwise denigrated her for being too educated or too Western.

These dimensions of *ethos* development buttress her success as a rhetor; in reflecting such a high moral character—the type of character that most people idealize but fail to realize in their own lives—Maathai imparts hope for true social change. Here, when audience members are able to identify with Maathai's *ethos*, to see a sliver of her goodness within themselves, they are subsequently moved to take action. Her management of situated *ethos* increases her appeal to diverse audiences; furthermore, her use of *ethos* to defy stereotypes and categorization sets her apart and situates her as someone whose public voice is not only acceptable, but necessary.

Rhetorical Action

Understanding Maathai's rhetorical action is also a key to understanding her success. Her use of rhetorical action is in many ways intertwined with her *ethos* construction. Here, the interplay of experiential knowledge, search for truth, and credibility create a space in which Maathai uses symbolic action mediated by government silence and public exposure to mandate a reclaiming of power. Indeed, Maathai's strongest uses of rhetorical action—those which further her ultimate goal of increasing agency and redistributing power in underdeveloped/overexploited areas—occur where symbolic action, silence, and publicity meet.

One of the first examples of Maathai's rhetorical use of government silence and public exposure began when she learned of a plan to develop a large skyscraper called the *Times* complex (so named because it would house the government-run newspaper *The Kenyan Times*) that would intrude upon Uhuru park—a center of local culture in Nairobi. Maathai realized that the financial, environmental, and cultural cost of the building complex far outweighed its potential benefits. To protest construction of the complex, she began writing open letters to various offices. She also sent copies of all of her correspondence to the press.

Despite the voracity with which she wrote letters, she did not expect the offices and agencies to respond to her questions or her appeals to their sense of cultural history and community. The letters were largely symbolic in that sense. The government's refusal to address her questions directly spoke volumes about its position and reflected indifference toward the people of Kenya. The rationale behind her persistence is clear: "The more I wrote," she says, "the more they knew that I knew, and the more the word would spread" (*Unbowed* 187).

During this public debate, Maathai continued her letter writing campaign until she reached the president. The government eschewed making any direct response to Maathai or answering her questions regarding the construction of the complex; rather, they made personal attacks against her. She never heard from the government directly, though the government spent considerable time discussing her. They even used a parliamentary procedure reserved for emergency situations to interrupt their usual schedule to discuss her public protest of the construction; during this time, they degraded her credibility and character. They never did, however, address the construction of the complex or its consequences (*Unbowed* 191).

The government's silence on the issue that Maathai had pushed to the center of public debate resonated with many Kenyans. Following Maathai's example, they began to send letters of dissent and protest to local press organizations; and indeed, many letter writers began to recognize the connections between the government's silence (i.e., indifference) toward public opinion and democracy (*Unbowed* 194). In speaking for the people, Maathai was able to open a forum for the people's voices. Here, she asserts that helping people speak was at the "heart of the issue":

Even though the immediate struggle was over the park and the right of everyone to enjoy green space, the effort was also about getting Kenyans to raise their voices. I was distressed at the audacity with which the government was violating peoples rights, quashing dissent—often brutally—and forcing men and women from their jobs, especially in the university and the civil service. Ordinary people had become so fearful that they had been rendered nearly powerless. Now, they were beginning to reclaim their power. (*Unbowed* 195)

Once again, the convergence of publicity, government silence, and symbolic action aided Maathai in her campaign to halt land-grabbing in the Karura Forest in Nairobi. Land-grabbing, which refers to the seizure of public land by the government without the consent or remuneration of the people, was a remnant of the colonial era in which the government parceled out public land as it saw fit. However, land-grabbing was particularly troublesome because of the environmental consequences that deforestation had already had on Kenya. Kenya simply could not afford to lose any more of its most precious natural resource: the forest. Indeed, Maathai believes that further deforestation in Kenya would cause the Sahara desert to spread south and further degrade quality of life/sustainability (*Unbowed* 261). Maathai, therefore, undertook another public battle to halt government intrusion on the Karura Forest.

She started this battle—like her earlier efforts to halt the constriction of the complex in Nairobi—with a letter. And the government retorted not surprisingly with silence as it had years before. The GBM had established a method of dealing with such issues: they would first alert the government to their concerns, then wait for a response; when they did not receive a response, they would let the press know what was going on via a conference; then, finally, when they still did not have a response from the government, they would begin to replant trees in deforested areas. The GBM would give the press notice when they would enter an area to plant trees so that news of their largely symbolic gesture would reach the greatest number of people (*Unbowed* 263).

In one instance, for example, Maathai recalls sneaking into the forest through a swampy area after it had been closed to the public; she remained there watering the young trees she had planted in spite of police presence and intimidation. When she was done watering the trees, the police officers gave her a ride out through the main gate. Much to the surprise of many, she emerged from the forest successfully—and the press was there to capture her exit from the forest and bring her story to the forefront of public debate (*Unbowed* 266). Then, when the potential for violence within the forest became too great, Maathai

planted a single tree just outside the forest gates to make a “statement that the government should return the land to the public” (*Unbowed* 267). Press scrutiny of the events that unfolded in Karura forest brought attention to the issue on an international scale; the government no longer had to face just the disempowered people of Kenya, but rather the world. Eventually, the (mis)allocation of land was stopped and the forest returned to its people.

Perhaps the most significant example of this sort of rhetorical action occurred when Maathai decided to work with the families (mostly mothers) of political prisoners in Kenya. During the Release of Political Prisoners campaign, she agreed to help the women even though she had just been released from prison after being charged with an array of serious crimes including “spreading malicious rumors, sedition, and treason” (*Unbowed* 112) after releasing a statement regarding rumors of a government-sponsored coup (*Unbowed* 113). In her quest for justice, however, she averred that she “didn’t want to allow a false charge to stop [her] from pursuing the truth” (*Unbowed* 217). This decision—one that would thrust her back into the public eye so soon after being labeled a traitor to her nation—came easily for Maathai: she knew that she needed to do what was right. Because it was no longer illegal to challenge the one party state, the imprisoned men should be released (*Unbowed* 216).

Through her experience involved in the public arena, she had developed an acute understanding of the government in action. Here, she explained to the women, “the government always responds to something that is done aloud and publicly....If you go to the attorney general quietly and appeal to him, you’ll be wasting your time. He’ll say ‘Yes, yes, yes,’ but he’ll do nothing” (*Unbowed* 217). Her past experiences dealing with the government allowed her to help the women develop a tactical approach to lobby for the release of their family members: they would make their case to the attorney general and then symbolically and passively protest the illegal retention political prisoners by keeping vigil in Uhuru Park for three days while praying and holding a hunger strike (*Unbowed* 217).

Maathai went with the women to the attorney general's office on a Friday afternoon to help them communicate with the government and provide support, and then she marched with them to an area of the park near a major intersection. There, they lit 52 candles—one for each of the imprisoned men—and waited for the release of the prisoners. The public position of the camp and the visibility of their gathering caused the citizens of Nairobi to take notice; soon they had grown from five lone women to a group of over 50 (*Unbowed* 218). On Sunday, Maathai orchestrated a church service and erected a large sign that labeled their enclave a "Freedom Corner" (*Unbowed* 219).

Though Maathai's goal in getting involved with this campaign was the release of political prisoners, the protest she organized had a profound impact on the citizens of Nairobi. Indeed, as the crowd in the freedom corner increased and the women were able to share their sons' stories of false imprisonment, other victims—many of whom were former political prisoners subjected to torture and cruelty at the hands of the government—came to share their stories (*Unbowed* 219). Yet the Kenyan government still turned a blind eye toward the highly visible symbolic protest against their corrupt practices. The government likely believed that the actions of a few women would go unnoticed, that their voices would never be loud enough or carry far enough to make a difference.

The publicity generated by the protest as well as the government's tacit response, however, opened the arena for public outcry. People who had never spoken before about the abuse they suffered at the hands of the government were able to reveal their secrets for the first time (*Unbowed* 219). Women who had never before challenged authority now "refused to be intimidated" when confronted by the police (*Unbowed* 220). Rather than fleeing or surrendering, some of the women stripped in a symbolic gesture that said to the violent police officers, "By showing you my nakedness, I curse you as I would my own son for the way you are abusing me" (*Unbowed* 221). These acts showed the seeds of emerging agency and reclamation of power.

The results of the Release Political Prisoners protest were profound: the citizens of Nairobi came together and found a collective voice in Uhuru Park. They now not only had the opportunity to speak—to share their stories—but permission; indeed, many of the people who came together to support the Release of Political Prisoners now felt a *mandate* to share their stories, to raise their voices against a seemingly indifferent government. Maathai’s use of symbolic action in conjunction with government silence and public exposure provided that mandate.

Maathai’s experience working with Release of Political Prisoners, however, did not end in Uhuru Park. After being attacked by the police, who tried to force the peaceful protesters to disband, the women found sanctuary in a church; their protest continued there for over a year. Indeed, Maathai takes her book’s namesake from this experience; she and women “remained unbowed” after the attack—they would no longer submit quietly to government’s tyranny (*Unbowed* 22). Their collective solidarity and unwillingness to acquiesce to the government provided the same sort of symbolic action that Maathai had provided for them for people all over the world. Most of the women remained in the cathedral in spite of false promises and threats of violence from the government; most remained even as their leader was called a liar and individual women were lured away with promises of the release of their son (*Unbowed* 223-25). However, this unyielding position once again caught the attention of a global audience. “Soon the gathering at the cathedral,” she recalls, “turned into a national sit-in demonstration, a forum for everyone, including the press, to hear how people had suffered under the general misgovernance of the country” (*Unbowed* 225). As the protest drew greater attention from international figures, the government finally released the prisoners: “the women proudly walked with their sons out through the cathedral’s open doors and into the bright light of midday” after holding a thanksgiving service and receiving a “certificate of endurance” from Maathai (*Unbowed* 226). Yet in spite of their sons’ release, they did not cease their work on behalf of political prisoners. Their work continues even today (*Unbowed* 226).

The continued activism of Maathai and the other members of the Release Political Prisoners campaign began though they had nothing personal to gain from such work: their family members had been freed; their lives could return to some semblance of normalcy. This continued work reflects the powerful and inspiring effects of Maathai's rhetorical action; she has created the space for "conversion or subversion of interests, for the affirmation of new horizons, and for the facilitation of changes in attitude, behavior, and self" (Royster 71). Indeed, at the center of each of these events where Maathai's rhetorical action was able to effect lasting change is a strong orientation toward finding a solution for a given problem.

CHAPTER FOUR: EMPLOYING SKILL

Now we are leaders, we lead our people
Now we are people, people of action
Now we are planters, we tell the people
Now we are green, our touch is green

—Lithia Sovell, “Now We Are Green, Our Touch is Green.” *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (109).

The Green Belt Movement has grown and prospered since its inception. According to its website, the GBM now oversees 600 community networks in Kenya; these networks operate 6,000 nurseries. Since the organization began 30 years ago, members have planted a staggering 30 million trees. These trees—planted on lands ranging from public forests to cultural or historical locations—have changed Kenya’s landscape, encouraging restoration of land and biodiversity. Furthermore, the efforts of the GBM have also united the disparate and sometimes conflicting tribes in Kenya; 250,000 of the 30 million trees have been planted for peace. Wangari Maathai’s leadership, particularly her ability to hone in on workable solutions, has allowed the GBM to flourish.

This solution-oriented approach—developed through Maathai’s multiple literacies and rhetorical contexts in conjunction with her construction of self (her identity formation as well as *ethos*) and emergence of mandates for socio-political action—has allowed her to manipulate her “available means of persuasion” (e.g., purposely highlighting government silence and indifference through symbolic acts and publicity) for maximum efficacy as a rhetor. Maathai describes her single-minded orientation toward finding a solution in the following terms:

For me, the destruction of the Karura Forest, like the malnourished women in the 1970s, the *Times* complex in Uhuru Park, and political prisoners detained without trial, were problems that needed to be solved, and the authorities were stopping me from finding a solution. What people see as fearlessness is really persistence. Because I am focused on the solution, I don’t see danger. Because I don’t see danger, I don’t allow my mind to imagine

what might happen to me, which is my definition of fear. If you don't foresee the danger and see only the solution, then you can defy anyone and appear strong and fearless.
(*Unbowed* 272)

This passage illustrates the coming together of the pieces of Maathai's unique development as a literate person and a powerful rhetor who calls for action; furthermore, it foregrounds an essential element in her success building collective agency through her unique program of citizen education: her unyielding focus on solution and refinement of technique.

The process of civic education that Maathai has developed mirrors the type of literacy training that Freire advocates in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Though Maathai has not provided any overt literacy training, her civic education program imparts knowledge that allows people to employ their skills in a way that engenders agency. This process of civic and environmental education is part of the natural evolution of the GBM; indeed, the organization that began as a way for rural people—mostly women—to address their needs burgeoned into an outlet for citizen education through Maathai's continued emphasis on attacking the underlying problem rather than the symptoms. Here, she came to realize that the underlying problem was a lack of agency and a need for empowerment in rural communities. The path toward her increased emphasis on civic education, however, was not without barriers. As Maathai explains in her 2004 Nobel Lecture, "Initially, the work was difficult because historically our people have been persuaded to think that because they are poor, they lack not only capital, but also knowledge and skills to address their challenges." Through her emphasis on community engagement, however, the participants were able to use their knowledge and skills to successfully change their environment by planting trees; planting trees, in turn, improved their quality of life. With the growth of the newly planted trees came a renewable source of firewood, a larger supply of clean drinking water, a more fertile soil. These changes began to repair the damage that mismanagement of natural resources had wrought on the living conditions of rural people; the people who had planted the trees—the rural women who had planted the trees—became primary agents in

this change. “Through their involvement,” Maathai asserts, “women gain some degree of power over their lives, especially in the social and economic position and reverence of the family” (Nobel Lecture).

Because of the potential for the GBM to empower women and improve their positions in the home and in society, Maathai embarked upon her citizen education program. This program presses against the common belief that relief can only come from “outside” the community; rather, Maathai’s pedagogy for citizen education is rooted firmly within the community. The process of citizen education begins with an identification of issues, then an exploration of their causes and potential solutions; the most crucial aspect of this education, however, begins when the participants make connections between their actions and the problems they witness. Only when “they make the connections,” Maathai believes, “between their own actions and the problems they witness in the environment and society” can they begin to “discover that they *must* be part of the solution” (Nobel Lecture 2, italics mine). At the crux of her educational theory is the realization of “hidden potential” that allows them “to overcome inertia and take action” (Nobel Lecture 2). Understanding the emergence of the GBM as an outlet of civic education hinges on understanding Maathai’s nature as an individual singularly focused on find a solution. Here, I explore the relationship between information and empowerment as well as the profound effects Maathai’s work has had empowering the people in Kenya and beyond.

Information and Empowerment

In an essay titled “Women, Information, and the Future,” Maathai examines the relationship between knowledge and the GBM; here, she points to a passage from the Bible for inspiration: “My people perish for lack of knowledge” (241). However, she then references our fallen biblical heroine, Eve, who partook of the tree of knowledge and subsequently wrought the fall of humankind. Though Maathai glosses over the many troubling implications of the story of Eve’s fall in the Garden of Eden, she uses this anecdote

to illustrate the “importance of acquiring knowledge and using it for the common good” (“Women, Information, and the Future” 241). This goal—acquiring “correct information so that we can make the right decisions and take appropriate actions”—is central to Maathai’s work. For Maathai, Eve’s story is one of inspiration:

For we must all seek knowledge and information from the tree of life in the center of our garden, our garden being our intellect, our heritage, libraries, laboratories, and, indeed, even good old Mother Nature herself. For that is exactly what Eve did: She took action to seek knowledge, never mind what man had to say about that. (Women, Information, and the Future” 241)

Maathai locates knowledge and information in a variety of sources without subordinating science to nature or empirical study to intuition. Through this lens, knowledge and information are not solely handed down from above or outside, but generated and found from within. Furthermore, she calls for action in acquiring knowledge; waiting as a passive recipient only precludes progress. More importantly, in revising the story of Eve so that she is an agent of change, Maathai disrupts the traditional narrative of what it means to be a woman and to have knowledge. In this sense, Eve becomes responsible not for the fall of humankind, but its salvation. The refiguring of Eve symbolically represents the experience of the women of the GBM—of the women who have acquired knowledge and information, who have developed and utilized the skills found in their respective “gardens,” in spite of open hostility toward their acquisition and use of that knowledge. Knowledge and skill, of course, are the provinces of the powerful: those who are privileged by race, gender, class, ethnicity, or sexuality (among others), those who have written our histories and decided what constitutes as knowledge. Indeed, fear of this knowledge in the “wrong” hands—the hands of women like Maathai and the members of the GBM—threatens to destabilize our standard narrative and ultimately disrupt the course of history.

Maathai reflects an acute understanding of this fear as well as an uncompromising commitment to disseminating/cultivating information and knowledge. Here, she writes as “informed woman living in a

world in which information is hidden from the ordinary by the economically and politically powerful” (Women, Information, and the Future” 248). Realizing her privileged position in relation to many others, Maathai approaches knowledge from a unique perspective. “I have used the information at my disposal,” she states, “to reach out to my fellow citizens, to empower them so that they can liberate themselves and improve their quality of life. What we do with information is the challenge to which each of us must rise” (“Women, Information, and the Future” 248). For Maathai, knowledge does not in itself equal power; rather, the individual conscious decision to use information and knowledge productively and for the greater good of humankind—“the challenge to which each of use must rise”—is the source of power. This fundamental principle forms the cornerstone of Maathai’s approach to civic education as well as its effectiveness empowering the citizens of Kenya and people around the world.

In Kenya

The genesis of the Green Belt Movement and its ultimate success worldwide is found in Maathai’s commitment to identifying the roots of underdevelopment and vigorously attacking those underlying causes. This emphasis on eliminating the underlying cause rather than ameliorating the symptoms of the problem is the hallmark of Maathai’s program. Indeed, when people ask her why she adopted planting trees as the focal point of her organization, she says, “I reacted to a set of problems by focusing on what could be done” (*Unbowed* 119). Maathai credits three converging “streams of knowledge” for her ability to not only see the problems that were occurring in Kenya but to take action against them; here, she identifies her civic knowledge developed first while in the United States and then through involvement in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (e.g., Kenya Red Cross, Kenya Association of University Women, United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], etc.), her academic knowledge developed through her formal education as a biologist, and her cultural knowledge of how “women’s work” in the household is

intrinsically tied to the land for her perspective on Kenya (*Unbowed* 120-24). Maathai, therefore, was able to use her skill sets and diverse knowledge to isolate a possible solution to problems she witnessed. I have traced here the ways that her evolution as a literate person, her construction of identity and the introduction of opportunity, and her skillful use of *ethos* and rhetorical action have contributed to her solution-oriented approach as well as the organization's success. Here, however, I examine origins of the most important aspect of her work: its profound consequences empowering the people of Kenya.

The GBM has been so successful because of its focus on fostering agency and empowerment among the rural citizens who are suffering the brunt of overexploitation, underdevelopment, and globalization. Through her experiences continually modifying the GBM to best serve the needs of the people, Maathai has developed an approach that helps members acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to develop a greater sense of agency. Here, I examine how Maathai has developed an educational program in conjunction with tree planting that cultivates agency and empowerment. Indeed, where traditional print-based literacy training is sparse, Maathai has been able to infuse her own organization with a type of literacy training that allows participants to read not words but relationships.

Though Envirocare was not able to flourish at its time of inception, Maathai held on to her hopes for tree planting. In 1977, when she increased her involvement with the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) and was elected to its executive committee as well as the Standing Committee on Environment, she once again introduced the idea. However, she made some crucial changes. First, she abandoned the name Envirocare to adopt a name that would resonate with her community. Here, she proposed Save the Land Harambee for the new campaign. This new name keyed into an element of Kenya's recent cultural past, as the term *harambee*—which means “let us all pull together” in Kswahili—had become popular during the presidency of Jomo Kenyatta after end of colonial rule in Kenya (*Unbowed* 130). Maathai chose this name consciously to tap into Kenya's cultural experience. She “wanted to place tree planting

within the spirit of Jomo Kenyatta’s idea of community mobilization”; the goal of Save the Land Harambee would be, therefore, not simply to garner funds but to “inspire” Kenyans (*Unbowed* 130).

Maathai’s revised vision and renewed enthusiasm for Save the Land Harambee is evident in the ceremonial nature of the organization’s first public act. On World Environment Day (June 5) in 1977, Maathai organized a procession and tree planting ceremony. She along with hundreds of others—including several prominent Kenyans—marched two miles from the convention center in central Nairobi to a Kamukunji Park near the city’s border. To increase the resonance of their walk, they followed a marching band. When they arrived at the tree planting site, the park in which president Kenyatta and other political leaders had rallied for freedom years earlier, they planted seven trees in honor of seven people. The seven figures that they planted trees in honor of represented the seven ethnic groups of Kenya; furthermore, they had all been influential members of their community in the late 19th and early 20th centuries before the advent of total colonial rule (*Unbowed* 131). Having a theme for each planting, Maathai believed, would enhance the “meaning of their action” (*Unbowed* 131). The seven trees planted on World Environment Day in 1977 became the first green belt; this first tree planting set in motion the emergence of the GBM that exists today.

Save the Land Harambee placed emphasis on the individual to reclaim their land, to “re-dedicate themselves to save their country from the threat of desertification through their *active participation* in forestation and reforestation” (*The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* 21, italics mine). In keeping with this spirit, Maathai wrote the following committal to be recited upon implantation of each new seedling:

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

our country from the actions and elements which would deprive present and future generations from reaping the bounty [of resources] which is the birthright and property of all. (*The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* 21, italics mine)

The above committal—an early articulation of Maathai’s approach to civic education—reflects the basic principle that would come to underlie her program: active participation. First, the participant must be aware of the issue. Presumably, the awareness of the problem would lie in the person’s everyday struggle to live on the once abundant land. The second component, however, requires that the person also be aware of the causes and consequences of that particular issue. With respect to deforestation, for example, the participant would need to be aware not only that the forests are disappearing but also that deforestation is caused by misuse of land and creates drought, malnutrition, famine and death. Here, multi-dimensional understanding of the issue is necessary. Furthermore, each person must make a “personal commitment” to the land. Participants, therefore, reclaim their stake in the land—their “birthright”—and by extension improve their position in their community.

In spite of the high goals Maathai had for Save the Land Harambee, the initiative was not an immediate success. Her early road bumps, however, taught her valuable lessons that were able to shape the success of the program overall. For example, an early lesson came when another organization tried to start a Green Belt group in an area that received little rain. To provide adequate water for the seedlings, the organization donated two donkeys for water transportation—traditionally a woman’s job—to the community. Because the Maasai people, the group indigenous to the land, had never used donkeys for water transportation, they reallocated the donkeys to serve other purposes more traditionally aligned with their culture. The seedlings planted died as soon as the GMB group left the community (*Unbowed* 133). From these early failures, though, Maathai learned the lessons critical to her overall success. First, she learned that the local community must commit to the project in order for it to be successful (*Unbowed* 132). Furthermore, and more importantly, she learned that locals needed to feel “invested” in the project to

mobilize sufficiently for the project to survive. Finally, she also learned the importance of local culture and context. This lesson is of utmost importance because of the cultural differences between the ethnic groups in Kenya; what makes sense in one community—one context—does not necessarily translate to other communities (*Unbowed* 133). These trials forced Maathai to continually revise the way she approached the GBM.

Another early hurdle that shaped the GBM was the problem Maathai encountered obtaining enough trees for the women to plant. In her initial organization design, she distributed seedlings via local farms. This model posed problems for several reasons. First, neither the women of the GBM nor the foresters could provide a means to transportation to or from the nurseries, which was often a great distance away. Second, the farmers often planted fast-growing exotic species; the GBM, however, wished to reforest with flora native to the region for greater long-term sustainability. Finally, the damage the young seedlings incurred en route to their ultimate destination was often too great; few of the uprooted plants were able to survive after being transported. To combat these problems, Maathai decided that the best course of action would be for the women to create their own nurseries. This decision transferred much responsibility for the survival of the GBM to local communities (*Unbowed* 135). Though the decision was a risky move for Maathai, it had a ripple-effect across the organization and set the tone for her increasing commitment to requiring personal action and civic engagement from participants.

To facilitate the transition that occurred when the women began establishing their own nurseries, Maathai had a forester to come speak to the groups about planting trees and ensuring their survival. These meetings created tension. The cavalier attitude of many foresters, who believed that the women would be unable to successfully cultivate the trees because they lacked formal education, created a disconnect between theoretical knowledge and employable skill. The foresters approached these meetings from a technical perspective; they were unable to accept the possibility that illiterate, uneducated, rural women

could perform the same tasks that they had earned diplomas to perform. Therefore, the foresters provided specialized information that complicated the business of planting trees, a skill that many women already had an intuitive understanding of from their cultural experiences. Uneasy with the gulf between the knowledge the foresters dispensed and the knowledge the women needed, Maathai tapped into her experiences planting crops as a young girl—an experience that she and many of the rural women she worked with had shared. “I don’t think you need a diploma to plant a tree,” she told them. “Use your woman sense. These tree seedlings are very much like the seeds you deal with—beans and maize and millet—every day. Put them in the soil. If they’re good, they’ll germinate. If they’re not, they won’t. Simple” (*Unbowed* 135).

The decision to have the women create their own stock of seedlings was a continuation of the active participation that Maathai initially envisioned. Furthermore, it also created what Maathai refers to as “foresters without diplomas.” In the emergence of “foresters without diplomas” she was able to instill a renewed sense of confidence among rural women. By encouraging the women to use “woman sense” rather than the official, technical information that the foresters disseminated, the women were able to realize that they are a valuable source of knowledge in their communities. Their seedlings flourished, and they certainly didn’t need men with diplomas to teach them how to do what they already knew how to do. The knowledge that they needed came from within rather than an outside, authoritarian source. Furthermore, the success that the women had planting seedlings allowed them to experiment and improve their techniques, thus imparting an additional layer of ownership in the communal project (*Unbowed* 136). “Not surprisingly,” Maathai notes, “the women were incredibly resourceful. They used the technology they had available and they used it well” (*Unbowed* 136).

When the women began to start establishing successful nurseries, Maathai tweaked operation of the GBM to offer incentives to the women and further increase their stake in the initiative. Here, Maathai offered the women modest compensation for each of the seedlings planted from their nurseries.

Furthermore, she also developed a ten-step program that they could follow to establish a nursery and begin the compensation process. These changes had two important consequences. First, offering the women compensation, though it only amounted to about four cents per seedling, gave the women an opportunity to earn their own income. More significantly, however, the changes also encouraged women to go to nearby communities to share their experiences planting trees and persuade people to get involved in the GBM. Maathai highlights this consequence as a “breakthrough,” as “it was now communities empowering one another for their own needs and benefits” (*Unbowed* 137). It was during this time that GBM was able to flourish; indeed, the step-by-step process of forming a GBM group “replicated itself several thousand times” (*Unbowed* 137). In addition to the significant environmental consequences the GBM had in Kenya, the organization was also helping to alleviate the sense of helplessness that plagued the nation by giving its citizens an active role in improving their living conditions.

Though the GBM did experience success in its early years, it did not begin to reach its full potential until the years following Maathai’s divorce and her decision to leave her position at the University of Nairobi to run for parliament in 1982. Being alone—and consequently unfettered by the stress of divorce and the demands of being a university professor—gave Maathai an opportunity to reflect on the GBM as an organization; though she was still looking for work in the private sector, Maathai focused more of her energy on improving the GBM. An opportunity to partner with the Norwegian Forestry Society and a grant from the UN Voluntary Fund for Women gave her the financial security necessary to the work for the GBM full time (*Unbowed* 168-9).

This financial relief ensured that the organization would have the opportunity to flourish. Here, Maathai further improved her incentive system by making certain that the GBM groups planted correct amounts of environmentally beneficial trees and that those trees survived for a several months before the groups were compensated (*Unbowed* 171). This change shifted the focus to the long term goals of the GBM,

which were to promote environmental restoration and sustainable development. This change also drew in other members of the community. Here, male family members—who more often had accounting skills than the women—would get involved by keeping records. Men also had greater liberty to travel and could therefore serve as nursery attendants. Although these changes introduced a degree of corruption into the organization, as the men hired to tend to the nurseries could easily falsify records, it created an additional outlet for rural people to generate income. Furthermore, it gave men the opportunity to get involved with GBM, which was often conceptualized as “just” a women’s group (*Unbowed* 172). The evolution of the GBM placed the responsibility for ensuring that each subsequent green belt planted was a success into the hands of the members of the community; the benefits of these changes were profound: they allowed a range of men and women in the community to use their skills to generate revenue and improve quality of life. These results reinforced the need for active participation that the organization was founded on.

The principle of active participation was ingrained in the organization’s operational design; Maathai’s desire to help people understand the causes and consequences of their disempowerment was not, however, inherent in everyday operation of a GBM group. It was in trying to meet this goal that organization became one that, in Maathai’s terms, “planted ideas” as well as trees (*Unbowed* 173). To accomplish this goal, Maathai began holding seminars among GBM groups. During these seminars, she would have the participants generate a list of the problems they face in their communities. After they had generated a substantial list—sometimes in excess of 150 items—she would ask them, “Where do you think these problems come from?” (*Unbowed* 173). The response, she recalls, almost always indicated the government as a sole cause of the problems. While Maathai would acknowledge the legitimacy of their belief that government mismanagement had allowed policies that has created and/or exacerbated the problems, she also pointed out a crucial dimension that the people often did not see: their own complicity in creating the problems that they faced (*Unbowed* 173). “Even though you blame the government,” she

asserted, “you really should blame yourselves. You need to do something about your situation. Do whatever is in your power” (*Unbowed* 174).

Furthermore, Maathai also realized that she needed to be able to articulate the linkages between act and consequence in a way that made sense to local populations. To frame the conversation in a way that made sense to an “illiterate or semi-literate” rural audience, she focused on asking the people list ways that they use(d) the land in their own lives—particularly how they use(d) plants native to their community. Here, the members of the community could see how reliant they were on the land for medical and spiritual reasons as well as those related to survival (i.e., food and shelter). This sort of activity, Maathai asserts, brings “indigenous trees back into communities’ daily lives and helps them perceive the environment as a real and living part of their communal life” (*The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* 82). Similarly, Maathai also notes that an appeal to emotion—to providing for children and future generations—was also an effective way to frame a discussion of conservation in a way that makes environmental restoration meaningful to rural communities. Only when these “powerful but simple messages are understood” can “people become convinced and begin to take action” (*The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* 83).

This shift toward civic education focused on issues of the most pressing importance to Kenyans: governance, culture and spirituality, Africa’s development crisis, and human/environmental rights. Here, the seminars emphasized the interconnectedness of these issues. Exploring these issues and their connections allowed the participants to enter into a conversation about what action to take. In understanding, for example, that government mismanagement contributes to environmental degradation or that efforts for “development” often eliminate indigenous practices or create overexploitation, the participants of the seminars could “perceive how their actions enhanced or retarded development” and therefore be “challenged to take appropriate action where necessary” (*The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the*

Approach and the Experience 48). These conversations gave participants a way to raise issues and deliberate on them—“to hold open dialogues amongst themselves as a way of searching for workable solutions to the issue” (*The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* 49).

Indeed, during these seminars Maathai kept a tight focus on what the people could do to improve the situation; in turn, Maathai was able to translate emphasis on active participation to personal responsibility. Through the civic/environmental education the people received in these seminars, they could recognize their roles in fostering disempowerment; they realized that through the erasure of their culture and emulation of European values, Kenyans were trapped into a cycle of oppression. They had abandoned indigenous ways (either by pressured applied by the government or in an effort to become more “modern”), yet the changes they made mostly worsened their situation. Here, they were left doing what they were supposed to be doing—growing cash crops, selling ivory, harvesting timber—but were still failing in the global economy. Their effort to improve their position by modeling Western economic development was met only with continued, if not deepened, strife. These factors created a sense of helplessness—a powerlessness—that reflected the government as the sole cause of all adversity while relegating the people to passive recipients of government action. The people thought they were doing what they could by following the European model of commerce; they did not, however, understand that applying this model in their context was a flawed approach—they did not understand that they were doing almost irreparable harm rather than good. Maathai was able to establish these connections in a way that made sense to the GBM participants. More importantly, however, she also urged them to acknowledge and begin to redress their role in generating and sustaining communal problems.

Maathai’s goal in this sort of consciousness raising was not malicious or meant to further degrade the community’s sense of self worth; rather, she sought to empower the people by disrupting their sense of powerlessness. She was able to articulate the connections between government policy and

underdevelopment; this articulation subsequently cleared a space in the GBM for a more direct civic and environmental education program. In helping people understand the varying relationships and linkages between their lives, Kenya's national cultural history/identity, and Kenya's role in a global context, she was able give people the tools necessary to understand how their actions—even the most seemingly minute—have profound consequences that worsen the problems they face. Even the decision to grow European crops rather than native ones, she explained, led to malnutrition and degraded soil quality. In this respect, the role that the individual plays in society at large came into focus; the people could therefore realize that they too were contributing to their own oppression and begin to take action against that oppression.

As Maathai recounts her experience with the GBM, she highlights community empowerment among the movement's many achievements. Here, empowerment of individuals and communities as well as community mobilization plays a central role in the success of the GBM. Beyond improving the lives of rural people through creating better living conditions from improved environments and generating employment, Maathai focuses on empowerment through education as a monumental achievement for the GBM, especially with respect to the governmental opposition the organization faced. Here, Maathai believes that “once empowered, people are capable of making conscious and informed decisions for self-determination” (*The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* 68). Her civic education fosters empowerment of disadvantaged groups. For example, Maathai points to the effect her civic education seminars have had on coffee farmers. During these seminars, the GBM explained Kenya's coffee industry to the farmers and emphasized the “dubious means that were being used to swindle them of their rightful income” (*The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* 68). With this knowledge, the farmers started a campaign for fair labor practices. Maathai also acknowledges the emergence of

women as community leaders as a source of empowerment (*The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* 69).

These small acts of empowerment, however, are seemingly meaningless at the local level. A group of coffee farmers in Kenya coming together to protect their rights or a women addressing a local issue without assistance from a GBM office barely scratches the surface of generating true social change in a sea of systematic oppression. Yet these individual acts of empowerment—of otherwise voiceless groups gaining a better understanding of their potential for action in changing the current situation—contribute to community mobilization, which generates more overt changes. The thousands of rural men and women as well as the institutions—particularly the schools—who have come together to combat deforestation and improve Kenya offer evidence confirming the power of a community to make a lasting impact on improving their quality of life through action (*The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* 69). The GBM has been able to unite disparate members of a community around a common issue and thus increase its potential for mobilization. Empowerment and subsequent community mobilization are perhaps the GBM's seminal achievements.

And Beyond

In my experience and observation, many middle-class Westerners—like rural participants in the GBM—do not necessarily understand the linkages between act and consequence. Often we go about our daily routines without much thought to the rest of the world—to the billions of people in developing nations or the millions of people living in poverty in our own countries. We slog through our days with only a passing thought (if that) given to the very real problems we face domestically and abroad. Though by many standards we are highly literate—well educated with the ability to read and write and communicate effectively in varying contexts—we remain illiterate with respect to our role(s) in a global

community; we simply do not understand how our seemingly minute actions could possibly affect the problems we face in our home countries or with the rest of the (developed and undeveloped) world. We see injustice and inequality everyday: some of us care very deeply; others do not. Those who do care very deeply often feel the same sense of powerlessness that plagues the rural citizens of Kenya—the same sense of helplessness that keeps them from actively working for change. The government is omnipotent, we lament; we alone can not possibly make a difference.

Yet Maathai's GBM has helped empower members of a global audience much the same way she has helped empower Kenyans. Indeed, the GBM, Wangari Maathai in particular, has helped members of a global community understand the complex linkages that connect environment, sustainable development, and oppression/empowerment both locally and abroad. Her success on a global level is derived from her keen use of the global press, her visibility as a public figure, and the accessibility of her GBM to Western audiences.

Foremost, Maathai's keen understanding of the importance of the press has helped to shape the influence she and the GMB have had globally. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Maathai's reliance on the press has exerted profound influence on her career. In terms of creating a mandate for action, her use of publicity to highlight government silence was a driving force behind many of her victories working for environmental protection and human rights. This same use of the press, however, has also served to provide informal education for people across the world. Drawing attention to the atrocities that occur in developing nations that Westerners are often sheltered from—the rampant human rights violations, ethnic cleansings, and rape of indigenous cultures, for example—has the potential to raise consciousness and in turn generate outrage (and perhaps subsequent action). The media, especially with respect to the emergence of the internet as a mode of instantaneous communication, has made the atrocities once hidden

public fodder for a global audience. Through always alerting the local and international press, Maathai was able to expose to the world issues that might otherwise remain hidden.

Maathai's visibility as a public figure has also furthered her ability to offer informal civic education to a global audience. Her involvement in world affairs and her appearances at key conferences and events has strengthened the position of the GBM by fostering relationships with powerful people and organizations across the globe. Furthermore, her attendance at conferences and events—particularly those that involve speaking engagements—offer valuable opportunities to educate audience members about the problems facing Kenya. In her speech presented at the 4th UN World Women's Conference in 1995, for example, Maathai used that opportunity to discuss “bottle-necks of development in Africa.” In this presentation Maathai systematically outlines the barriers to development that she witnesses in Africa. Here, she explicates a variety of factors—including lack of security, destructive leadership, poverty, illiteracy, and over-dependence on foreign languages—that have fostered Africa's subordinate position in the global market. Through explaining the linkages between the actions developed nations take to improve their economic position and/or global power, Maathai is able to establish linkages between domestic actions and global consequences thus imparting the same sort of causal understanding among a more diverse audience. The global public, therefore, can begin to take personal responsibility for the current situation and begin to take action accordingly. In recent years, Maathai's position as a public figure after winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 thrust her further into the spotlight as a global leader and strengthened her work as an environmentalist and activist. Her voice and her message is one that resonates loudly and calls for action within Kenya and around the world.

In addition to using the press to draw attention to the situations that Kenyans face and using her position as a Nobel Laureate to educate the public and generate support, she has also provided a hands-on method of providing civic education through the development of Green Belt Safaris. Green Belt Safaris give

Westerners an opportunity to witness firsthand the monumental work the GBM is doing in Kenya and throughout Africa. Here, a participant is able to stay with a host family involved in one of the GBM groups. During the stay, the person performs daily duties along with the host; he or she gains a better understanding of the role of the land and the importance of sustainable development as well as how essential conservation/reconstruction is to preserving the history and culture of a particular community. Green Belt Safaris offer access into communities that are profiting from the environmental changes and empowerment that the GBM has imparted; the participant, therefore, gets a better sense of the importance of engendering agency. Much like Maathai returned to Kenya in the 1960s with a renewed sense of enthusiasm and hope for the possibilities of change, participants return to their native country with a greater understanding of the amazing impact outwardly small and inconsequential actions can have. Additionally, Maathai has also provided a step-by-step guide for replicating the GBM. Providing this process and making it accessible allows diverse populations to institute branches of the GBM across the world.

Because of Maathai's work with the Green Belt Movement, she has been able to empower diverse audiences across the globe. As the Western world increasingly turns its attention to issues of climate change and environment, Maathai's work will continue to flourish and her powerful message will continue to spread. Though Maathai's work focuses on Kenya at the local level, the wisdom she disseminates has global value. Here, her message is that taking action is the only way to begin to alter our present circumstance. Self-determination as well as an unwavering commitment to personal responsibility and individual action are the only factors that generate community mobilization and effect change. Change, while often threatening, is the only way to ensure the survival of future generations. The type of civic/environmental knowledge that Maathai imparts, the skills participants are able to develop and employ, and the agency they develop as a result is essential to the process of change; indeed, her approach of engendering agency via explicating linkages and emphasizing personal responsibility/action is the

foundation of any pedagogy that seeks to help students develop a critical literacy with capacity for social change.

CONCLUSION: PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise. Seek what they sought.

—Matsuo Basho

I undertook this project with several questions in mind. I was motivated by an intense desire to better understand literacy—not a print-based literacy per se, but the comprehensive and multi-dimensional sort that I aspire to achieving as an adult in the United States and helping students develop as an instructor in American universities. I also hoped to understand what drives the few people in the world today who galvanize movements and compel people to act in the best interest of their community. I wanted to understand how I could develop that same sense of agency—that personal commitment to action for change—in my every day life. At the heart of this study, however, is an intense desire to infuse my pedagogical approach to first-year composition with same civic education that Maathai has utilized so well in Kenya and across the world.

Through my analysis I have been able to identify the major themes and trends that have governed Maathai's career. Her unique literacy development, for example, gave her the ability to frame problems in a way that allowed her to singled-mindedly see a solution. *Kairos*—that fleeting opportune moment to raise one's voice and be heard—opened the forum for her entrance into the global conversation on conservation. Her *ethos* and mandates for action allowed her to become an effective rhetor and ensured the success of the GBM. In turn, all of these factors converged, creating a space for civic literacy education that engenders agency in Kenya and abroad. The sum of Maathai's work reflects the ability of one person to make a difference against many obstacles—her ethnicity, her gender, and her political leanings to name a few. Her work is an inspiration; inspiration, however, becomes meaningless if we fail to act. Translating inspiration

to action is perhaps the greatest hurdle to overcome in developing a first-year composition pedagogy focused on social responsibility, civic engagement, and active participation.

The role of first-year composition in the university is a site of contention. Some feel that composition should serve as a service course to other disciplines—should be a course that teaches students the basic skills of academic writing and ensures that they can meet the communicative demands of the “real work” of the university. This camp tends to value technically correct writing over writing that struggles with the mechanics of expression but reflects critical thought. This approach to first-year composition, though commonplace, often relies on a skills-and-drill approach that removes the potential of the coursework work to help students become more productive members of society—to develop deliberative agency. Deliberative agency, however, has informed the teaching of rhetoric and by extension the teaching of composition since its inception: rhetoric is intrinsically tied to binding communities, promoting social cohesion, and demanding active participation.

Students, I believe, enter the average Western university in dire need of civic education. Their secondary educations have often taught them that standardized test scores are the ultimate measure of success. The majority of traditional aged college students—who range from about 18 to 22 years old—enter college with excellent SAT scores, but without a clue as to how to understand or participate in the decision-making processes that adults are expected to engage in. Their previous instructors, often restricted by the test preparation component that dominates secondary curriculum, simply do not have the time or the energy or the resources to teach deliberative agency. Young people entering college often lack the skills necessary to become active members of their community—to become people who seek to make decisions rather than passively accept the decisions made for them by “adults.” Yet if students do not earn an education in civic literacy or begin to develop deliberative agency in secondary schools or in college, when will they learn it?

While producing technically correct writing should naturally be a course goal in first-year composition, so too should civic education. The traditional liberal arts education is designed to give students the breadth necessary to make connections—to read relationships as well as words and form a sense of place in history as well as in community. However, many students still emerge from the university apathetic and uninvolved. Something must be missing from this form of education, and I believe that Maathai's brand of civic education with emphasis on deliberative agency is that missing link.

Much like Kennedy's legacy in the United States—both the programs that he instituted, including the one that allowed her to come to the United States, and the civic education she earned while watching the democratic process in action—inspired Maathai, I find inspiration in her work. When Maathai returned to Kenya, she was able to translate that inspiration into action by working for the good of her community. She had witnessed the power of deliberative agency to effect change in the United States and wished to bring that same sense of potential for change to her home land. I have gained the same inspiration from studying Maathai's work and realizing the difference she has made in Kenya, and I aspire to bringing the same sense of hope she had for Kenya in the early 1960s to the communities that I participate in as a student, educator, and citizen.

Because of my recent experiences as an instructor of composition at a large university and my decision to make teaching first-year composition a career rather than something that I just happen to do, I have been trying to tease out the implications of Maathai's approach to literacies, knowledge, and skill with respect to my own desire to teach deliberative agency alongside of correct usage, punctuation, and MLA documentation in the composition classroom. As a composition instructor, I want to reconnect with the roots of rhetoric; I want my students to leave the course not only able to use a semicolon correctly but also to be more knowledgeable, productive, and action-oriented members of their communities. However, whenever I try to translate her pedagogical approach to my own classroom, I am met with an inevitable

“yes, but”—a figurative brick wall that makes Maathai’s approach seem so inaccessible, so far beyond my reach as novice instructor.

The foundation of Maathai’s approach lies in articulating the connections between action and reaction—in exposing the sometimes hidden linkages that create the dire situations we face socially, culturally, and politically. Yet how can I articulate connections and expose linkages when I do not understand the heart of these problems myself? Furthermore, the problems that I see may be dramatically different than the problems that my students see. How can I ensure that I am not inadvertently imposing my world view and value system on them? How can I engage students in the civic sphere—make them interested in the issues that will impact their lives yet are seemingly out of their control? How can I hold them to high standards that I do not necessarily reach in my own life?

The students that I have worked with have clearly demonstrated an interest in “real” issues; however, the issues that they overwhelmingly clamored to research and write about were those that were the closest to their life experience. My mostly affluent and middle-class, mostly white and Hispanic students chose to write about obesity, eating disorders, body image, sexual education in public schools, the rise of social networking websites, and violence in the media. A good number of students wrote about climate change; yet their interest seemed to stem primarily from the release of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*. A scant few chose to write about “big-picture” issues—about globalization, ethnic cleansing, or poverty. With rare exceptions, their analysis of the issue was superficial at best. And even the most passionate students, those who spoke about their issue of choice with what seemed to be genuine conviction, suffered paralysis not when asked to provide a solution but when asked what changes they could make to be part of the solution. The same mentality ruled whether with respect to obesity or climate change: I know that my actions are part of the problem, but I can not or will not change.

I understand this conundrum well: I do not recycle even though it is completely within my power; I shop at Wal-Mart even though I find their labor practices deplorable; I never manage to vote in local elections. I am the proto-typical lazy American, too absorbed in my own day-to-day routine to lead by example. And I believe that in spite of my sometimes lofty principles, I am the rule rather than the exception. This flaw on my part poses a substantial barrier to truly embracing Maathai's pedagogy. Part of Maathai's success as a rhetor and a leader lies in her commitment to principle. She lives her life with an absolute dedication to upholding her values, and her *ethos*—a pillar of her effectiveness—reflects this strength of character. How can instructors encourage students to take action and embrace social responsibility without first taking action themselves?

Furthermore, Maathai's pedagogical approach does not come without a few complications. Though her civic education is inspirational and absolutely crucial, I do find certain aspects of it troubling. The people who participate in the seminars begin to take action after exploring the roots of the problems they face, yet they are still relying on GBM members to explain those linkages. In some sense this method mirrors the banking-concept of education; knowledge is still passed from above to below, from the enlightened few to the illiterate many. If, for example, the GBM tells the participants that the coffee companies are taking advantage of them, it must be so. At what point do the participants begin to realize the linkages on their own? Does the GBM need to be a constant presence or do the participants internalize the skills necessary to interrogate the issues they face without outside intervention? When does this shift occur? Are the participants being inculcated to believe that the GBM is infallible? When does discussion become indoctrination or "fact" become propaganda? The members of the GBM, much like modern instructors, must remain mindful of the potential to lose sight of their ultimate goal—the development of critical/civic literacies for a greater agency—to avoid crossing the fine line between discussion and indoctrination.

Though the questions raised in trying to translate Maathai's approach the Western university are crippling at face value, they do not altogether preclude Western instructors from adopting and applying Maathai's approach. Rather, the issues raised by these questions further establish the absolute necessity of teaching deliberative agency. Instead of attempting to figuratively follow in Maathai's footsteps, however, civic-minded instructors must (as Basho purports) seek what she sought: they must focus on developing an approach to teaching civic literacy that engenders agency in their particular context. With these factors in mind, I have sifted through the GBM approach to adapt concepts with potential usefulness in a first-year composition course that teaches deliberative agency and civic literacy. What follows is my best attempt to offer recommendations for a first-year composition course inspired by Maathai's approach to civic education.

At the heart of the success of Maathai's approach to civic education is the realization that participants *must* have a stake in the project in order for it to be successful. But this aspect of the pedagogical approach is particularly sticky. How do we make issues of "real" importance matter to seemingly self-absorbed eighteen year olds? How can we establish linkages in a way that calls for action? How do we make the problems that seem so remote—so far removed from their everyday existence—into topics that can hold student interest for more than five minutes? Appropriate forethought before the course begins while building the syllabus—during course invention—could alleviate some of these issues.

Instructors could use a variety of strategies in designing a civic-minded composition course. Here, the instructor may select a course theme that guides selection of readings and/or assignments and demonstrates the range of conversations on an issue. This approach would allow the instructor to learn enough about the issue to be able to communicate the linkages and relationships cohesively to students.

Rather than selecting a theme for the course, however, an instructor could also design the course in another way: by asking students to make a list of the problems that they face much like Maathai asks GBM

participants to make a list of their problems. This list could serve as an effective starting point for developing a course theme or set of intersecting themes. By generating a list of issues, the instructor would be able to hone in on the areas that students are most interested in—the problems or issues that they have a personal stake in. Furthermore, if the instructor knows very little about the issues that matter most to their students, he or she could use that moment to disrupt the traditional balance of knowledge distribution in the classroom. Instructors may elect to admit their lack of knowledge rather than hiding it—they could give students the opportunity to “teach” the teacher by explaining the problems or linkages from a different perspective. In this sense, the course becomes a collective learning endeavor; the instructor and student could then engage in dialogue from a more equal position that allows them to make connections and establish linkages together. Investigating an issue that is unfamiliar to the instructor, while daunting at the outset, would allow the instructor to push against the boundaries of knowledge and authority in the classroom as well as make it more difficult to cross the sometimes fuzzy border between discussion and indoctrination.

This approach, however, is somewhat limited, as it does not allow the instructor to prepare a traditional syllabus (with page numbers from a single text) before the course begins. An instructor who wishes delineate a precise schedule of readings rather than a more conceptual syllabus before the course begins could select readings from a range of interdisciplinary sources—both scholarly and informal—that speak to each other and sequence those readings in a way that allows students make connections and/or linkages on their own or in conjunction with discussions. This approach gives the instructor control of the course material as well as exposes students to a broad spectrum of ideas. In my own career as a student, the course that had the most influence on helping me establish linkages and make connections offered multi-disciplinary perspectives on gender studies. The course text—a packet of essays from varying genres on issues related to gender that the instructor had chosen—is one that I have kept and continue to refer to

today. This sequence of readings and assignments—selected painstakingly to build upon each other and offer valuable insights in the many dimensions of a single issue—gave students in the course the skills necessary to enter conversations on a broad range of issues related to gender.

In addition to approaching issues through a multi-disciplinary lens, tapping into cultural memory is also an important aspect of imparting deliberative agency. In Maathai's civic education, she used memory to help participants understand the cultural, spiritual, and historical importance of their land. Without this connection few people will ever be genuinely moved to make action. In a first-year composition class, the instructor could use events of the recent past to generate conversation. Here, juxtaposing student experiences and establishing patterns throughout history could help students understand the larger implications of the present situation. Issues that resonate with students—Hurricane Katrina or 9/11, for example—could open discussions on race, poverty, climate change, globalization, or the roots of terrorism. Additionally, where Maathai taps into participants' desire to preserve the land for their children, instructors could use parents or other family members in much the same way. We can ask students what will happen in the future if the current generation of rising adults fails to take action—by asking, for example, what will happen to their parents if we collectively fail to address social security issues—in a way that establishes a connection between present action and future consequence in their lives.

In order to further raise the student's stake in the composition course, making the product of the course—the print-based material that will ultimately serve as the basis of instructor's evaluation of student progress—public could bolster a curriculum designed to enhance deliberative agency as well. Moving beyond the traditional products of the composition course—the essay or research paper—is crucial to this shift, however. Real writing and communication occur outside of the vacuum of the university; if we want students to become competent members of the civic sphere, we must make sure they can communicate effectively through a variety of modes and mediums. The first step in this shift involves making the writing

situation less contrived. So much of the conversation that students engage in occurs privately between instructor and student; asking students to craft texts for a larger audience that are of publishable quality simultaneously raises student expectations and breaks the public/private dichotomy.

To meet this goal, instructors may ask students to write an opinion piece or editorial for submission to a local publication. They may opt to partner with a local organization for a service-learning course. They may have students write a letter to local member of Congress. Even creating a website for student writing (with permission of the student, of course) or having students write reactions papers to each other could foster a greater sense of public conversation among peers. Though building these “real-life” writings into a course requires more time and energy on the part of the instructor, it also forces students outside of their immediate present into a larger community. For an instructor who hopes to foster civic literacy and agency, making student writing accessible to a “real” audience could aid in development of a more effective curriculum and pedagogical approach.

Furthermore, instructors must also transcend their pre-existing notions about what it means to be active in the civic sphere. Though we often conceptualize activism or agency through our own experiences or the experiences of our recent cultural past, we must also realize that the nature of activism is constantly evolving. In a recent *New York Times* editorial titled “Generation Q,” Thomas Friedman—author of *The World is Flat*—muses on this generation of college students: Generation Q (for Quiet). Through the narrow lens of his observations, he asserts that college students today do not lack idealism or optimism; rather, an almost irrational optimism and idealism abounds on college campuses. What college students lack, he believes, is “activism and outrage”—“Generation Q,” he says, “may be too quiet, too online, for its own good, and for the country’s own good.”

Friedman sees traditional modes of activism as the only ways that students will be able to effect change:

Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy didn't change the world by asking people to join their Facebook crusades or to download their platforms. Activism can only be uploaded, the old-fashioned way — by young voters speaking truth to power, face to face, in big numbers, on campuses or the Washington Mall. Virtual politics is just that — virtual.

Here, he effectively dismisses the ways that college students have elected to engage in civic discourse; because he has not witnessed “an online petition or a mouse click for carbon neutrality” make a difference in his lifetime, he assumes that these forms of civic discussion/participation rooted in new media are less valid than their traditional counterparts. Insisting on activism and outrage expressed via traditional models reflects an inability of the instructor to challenge the status quo, to continually focus on a solution and refine technique. Accepting the role of new media in civic literacy and deliberative agency validates existing student participation and clears a space for students in civic life.

Ultimately, the goal of this sort of pedagogical stance is to help students connect with their land—with their position in the United States, a participatory democratic-republic that sometimes fails to live up to its own high ideals. An intense examination of factors that contribute to current situations and problems that we face in a given community—an unwavering desire to understand why something is the way it is—is crucial to developing critical and civic and cultural literacies; questioning our own role in creating that situation, however, is crucial to developing the deliberative agency necessary to participate and effect meaningful change. Only through recognizing our complicity in the problem do we realize the power to make changes. Without understanding these linkages—without developing a multi-dimensional literacy that allows a student to read relationships between governments and citizens or land and life—acquiring simple print-based literacy will not have the ability to cultivate deliberative agency or social change.

There is no single formula for teaching civic literacy or deliberative agency; however, instructors who espouse civic literacy and agency as course goals can clearly work with Maathai's approach to build an appropriate curriculum. Indeed, the lessons I have learned from studying Maathai's life and work with

respect to the development of civic literacy and deliberative agency have been as valuable—perhaps more so—as any current composition texts I have read. Taking a cue from Maathai, from her unyielding commitment to improving her community through active participation, has renewed my commitment to teaching deliberative agency; I have a greater understanding of the importance of my role as a composition instructor in encouraging social change. Furthermore, I have a greater commitment to making changes in my own life so that I can lead by example. First-year composition instructors wield far more power and influence than their often subordinate institutional status indicates. We are the first instructors in students' college experience who will likely know each student by name; we are often the first to engage them in group discussions or meet with them in one-on-one conferences. This relationship with the student offers a valuable opportunity to use innovative approaches to teaching. If, like Wanagri Maathai, we single-mindedly focus on embracing and creating and refining a curriculum in which academic literacy supports critical, cultural, and civic literacies—a pedagogy where students can begin to develop a multi-dimensional understanding of their varying roles in a community— we can plant the seeds of deliberative agency and subsequent social change.

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