

Slow Violence, Gender, and the Environmentalism of the Poor

Ah, what an age it is / When to speak of trees is almost a crime /
For it is a kind of silence about injustice!

—Bertolt Brecht, “An die Nachgeborenen” (To posterity)

Kenya’s Green Belt Movement, cofounded by Wangari Maathai, serves as an animating instance of environmental activism among poor communities who have mobilized against slow violence, in this case, the gradual violence of deforestation and soil erosion. At the heart of the movement’s activism stand these urgent questions: What does it mean to be at risk? What does it mean to be secure? In an era when sustainability has become a buzzword, what are the preconditions for what I would call “sustainable security”? And in seeking to advance that elusive goal, how can Maathai as a writer-activist working in conjunction with environmentally motivated women from poor communities, most effectively acknowledge, represent, and counter the violence of delayed effects?

Maathai’s memoir, *Unbowed*, offers us an entry point into the complex, shifting collective strategies that the Green Belt Movement (GBM) devised to oppose foreshortened definitions of environmental and human security. What emerges from the GBM’s ascent is an alternative narrative of national

security, one that would challenge the militaristic, male version embodied and imposed by Kenya's President Daniel arap Moi during his twenty-four years of authoritarian rule from 1978 to 2002. The Green Belt Movement's rival narrative of national security sought to foreground the longer timeline of slow violence, both in exposing environmental degradation and in advancing environmental recovery. At the same time, *Unbowed* provides us with an entry point into some challenging questions about the movement memoir as an imaginative form, not least the relationship between singular autobiography and the collective history of a social movement.

The Green Belt Movement had modest beginnings. On Earth Day in 1977, Maathai and a small cohort of likeminded women planted seven trees to commemorate Kenyan women who had been environmental activists.¹ By the time Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, the movement had created 6,000 local tree nurseries and employed 100,000 women to plant 30 million trees, mostly in Kenya, but in a dozen other African countries as well.² The movement's achievements have been both material—providing employment while helping anchor soil, generate shade and firewood, and replenish watersheds—and symbolic, by inspiring other reforestation movements across the globe. As such, the Green Belt Movement has symbolized and enacted the conviction that (as Lester Brown has stressed in another context) “a strategy for eradicating poverty will not succeed if an economy's environmental support systems are collapsing.”³

Early on, Maathai alighted on the idea of tree planting as the movement's core activity, one that over time would achieve a brilliant symbolic economy, becoming an iconic act of civil disobedience as the women's efforts to help arrest soil erosion segued into a struggle against illicit deforestation perpetrated by Kenya's draconian regime. Neither soil erosion nor deforestation posed a sudden threat, but both were persistently and pervasively injurious to Kenya's long-term human and environmental prospects. The symbolic focus of mass tree plantings helped foster a broad alliance around issues of sustainable security, a set of issues crucial not just to an era of Kenyan authoritarianism, but to the very different context of post-9/11 America as well, where militaristic ideologies of security have disproportionately and destructively dominated public policy and debate.

The risk of ignoring the intertwined issues of slow violence and sustainable security was evident in many American responses to the March

2003 invasion of Iraq, which was widely represented as a clean strategic and moral departure from the ugly spillages of total warfare. Even many liberal commentators adhered to this view. Hendrik Hertzberg, writing in the *New Yorker*, declared that

[w]hatever else can be said about the war against the Iraqi dictatorship that began on March 19th, it cannot be said that the Anglo-American invaders have pursued anything remotely resembling a policy of killing civilians deliberately. And, so far, they have gone to great tactical and technological lengths to avoid doing it inadvertently. . . . What we do not yet know is whether a different intention, backed by technologies of precision, will produce a different political result.⁴

This war, Hertzberg continued, was not the kind that “expanded the battlefield to encompass whole societies.”⁵ Like most American media commentators at the conflict’s outset, Hertzberg bought into the idea that so-called smart bombs exhibit a morally superior intelligence.⁶ Yet, depending on the ordnance and strategies deployed, a quick “smart” war may morph into a long-term killer, leaving behind landscapes of dragging death. Precision warfare that has receded into memory often continues, through its active residues, to maim and slaughter imprecisely for generations.

The battlefield that unobtrusively threatens to encompass whole societies is of direct pertinence to the conditions that gave rise to Kenya’s Green Belt Movement. The movement emerged in response to what one might call the violence of staggered effects in relation to ecologies of scale. From the perspective of rural Kenyan women whose local livelihood has been threatened by soil erosion’s slow march, what does it mean to be secure in space and time? As Maathai notes,

during the rainy season, thousands of tons of topsoil are eroded from Kenya’s countryside by rivers and washed into the ocean and lakes. Additionally, soil is lost through wind erosion in areas where the land is devoid of vegetative cover. Losing topsoil should be considered analogous to losing territory to an invading enemy. And indeed, if any country were so threatened, it

would mobilize all available resources, including a heavily armed military, to protect the priceless land. Unfortunately, the loss of soil through these elements has yet to be perceived with such urgency.⁷

What is productive about Maathai's reformulation of security here is her insistence that threats to national territorial integrity—that most deep-seated rationale for war—be expanded to include threats to the nation's integrity from environmental assaults. To reframe violence in this way is to intervene in the discourse of national defense and, hence, in the psychology of war. Under Kenya's authoritarian regime, the prevailing response to soil erosion was a mix of denial and resignation; the damage, the loss of land, went unsourced and hence required no concerted mobilization of national resources. The violence occurred in the passive voice, despite the regime's monumental resource mismanagement.

Maathai's line of reasoning here can be connected to activist writings from elsewhere in the global South, most strikingly to Vandana Shiva's advocacy for soil security as a form of environmental justice.⁸ Shiva's arguments are inflected with the distinctive history in India of the Green Revolution, peasant resistance to industrial agriculture, and the battle against transnational corporate plant patenting, but her insistence on broadening our conception of security is consistent with the stance that underlies Maathai's soil and tree politics.

Soil erosion results in part, of course, from global forms of violence—especially human-induced climate change, to which rural Kenyan women contribute little and can do very little to avert. But the desert's steady seizure of once viable, fertile land also stems from local forms of slow violence—deforestation and the denuding of vegetation—and it was at those junctures that the Green Belt women found a way to exert their collective agency. As the drivers of the nation's subsistence agriculture, women inhabited most directly the fallout from an environmental violence that is low in immediate drama but high in long-term consequences.

Resource bottlenecks are difficult to dramatize and, deficient in explosive spectacle, typically garner little media attention. Yet the bottlenecks that result from soil erosion and deforestation can fuel conflicts for decades, directly and indirectly costing untold lives. Certainly, if we take our cues

from the media, it is easy to forget that, in the words of the American agronomist Wes Jackson, “soil is as much a nonrenewable resource as oil.”⁹ International and intranational contests over this finite resource can destabilize whole regions. Soil security ought to be inextricable from national security policy, not least in a society like Kenya, which has lost 98 percent of its anchoring, cleansing, and cooling forest cover since the arrival of British colonialists in the late nineteenth century.¹⁰ Together transnational, national, and local forces—climate change, an authoritarian regime’s ruthless forest destruction, and rural desperation—fueled the assault on human and environmental security that the Green Belt Movement recognized as inextricably entangled. That threat had its roots in a colonial history of developmental deforestation, most memorably evoked in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s epic novel *Petals of Blood*, where an elder remarks how “the land was covered with forests. The trees called rain. They also cast a shadow on the land. But the forest was eaten by the railway. You remember they used to come for wood as far as here—to feed the iron thing. Aah, they only knew how to eat, how to take away everything.”¹¹ Despite Ngugi’s forceful critique of colonial and neocolonial land politics, his novels tend—as Laura Wright notes—to fall back on an essentialist feminizing of the soil, replete with oppositions between a precolonial virginal purity and neocolonialism as prostitution.¹² One of the key challenges facing Maathai, as a writer and activist, was how to dramatize the gendered dynamics of Kenyan land politics without submitting to the sentimental essentialism that mars Ngugi’s novels. To understand the angle of her approach requires that we engage the metaphoric underpinnings of the GBM’s gender and civic politics.

The Theatre of the Tree

The Green Belt Movement’s achievements in engaging the violence of deforestation and soil erosion flowed from three critical strategies. First, tree planting served not only as a practical response to an attritional environmental calamity but to create, in addition, a symbolic hub for political resistance and for media coverage of an otherwise amorphous issue. Second, the movement was able to articulate the discourse of violent land loss to a deeper narrative of territorial theft, as perpetrated first by British colonialists and later by their neocolonial legatees. Third, the Green Belt Movement

made strategic use of what one might call intersectional environmentalism, broadening their base and credibility by aligning themselves with—and stimulating—other civil rights campaigns that were not expressly environmental, like the campaigns for women’s rights, for the release of political prisoners, and for greater political transparency.¹³

The choice of tree planting as the Green Belt Movement’s defining act proved politically astute. Here was a simple, pragmatic, yet powerfully figurative act that connected with many women’s quotidian lives as tillers of the soil. Soil erosion and deforestation are corrosive, compound threats that damage vital watersheds, exacerbate the silting and desiccation of rivers, erode topsoil, engender firewood and food shortages, and ultimately contribute to malnutrition. Maathai and her allies succeeded in using these compound threats to forge a compound alliance among authoritarianism’s discounted casualties, especially marginalized women, citizens whose environmental concerns were indissociable from their concerns over food security and political accountability.

At political flashpoints during the 1980s and 1990s, these convergent concerns made the Green Belt Movement a powerful player in a broad-based civil rights coalition that gave thousands of Kenyans a revived sense of civic agency and national possibility. The movement probed and widened the fissures within the state’s authoritarian structures, clamoring for answerability within what Ato Quayson, in another context, calls “the culture of impunity.”¹⁴

The theatre of the tree afforded the social movement a rich symbolic vocabulary that helped extend its civic reach. Maathai recast the simple gesture of digging a hole and putting a sapling in it as a way of “planting the seeds of peace.”¹⁵ To plant trees was to metaphorically cultivate democratic change; with a slight vegetative tweak, the gesture could breathe new life into the dead metaphor of grassroots democracy. Within the campaign against one-party rule, activists could establish a ready symbolic connection between environmental erosion and the erosion of civil rights. At the heart of this symbolic nexus was a contest over definitions of growth: each tree planted by the Green Belt Movement stood as a tangible, biological image of steady, sustainable growth, a dramatic counterimage to the ruling elite’s kleptocratic image of “growth,” a euphemism for their high-speed piratical plunder of the nation’s coffers and finite natural resources. Relevant here

is William Finnegan's observation, in a broader international context, that "even economic growth, which is regarded nearly universally as an overall social good, is not necessarily so. There is growth so unequal that it heightens social conflict and increases repression. There is growth so environmentally destructive that it detracts, in sum, from a community's quality of life."¹⁶ Certainly, there is something perverse about an economic order in which the unsustainable, ill-managed plunder of resources is calculated as productive growth rather than a loss of GNP.

Within the metaphoric groves of "growth," we have witnessed a huge spectrum of literary tree politics. Bertolt Brecht, from his Danish exile in 1939 most memorably lamented the dark times he lived in, times of "terrible tidings": "Ah, what an age it is / When to speak of trees is almost a crime / For it is a kind of silence about injustice!"¹⁷ The poem that bears those words—"An die Nachgeborenen" (To posterity or To the unborn)—has sometimes been invoked by those who wish to distinguish the hard, clear clarion call of radical politics from the soft claims of environmentalism. Yet Brecht was clearly writing into a particular cultural moment—into an ascendant fascism, a powerful strain of blood-and-soil German romanticism implicated in Nazism's ascent. As Kenya's Green Belt Movement testifies, there are other eras when, for the sake of the unborn, we need to talk about trees with unrelenting urgency; indeed, when to be silent about trees is to become complicit in an injustice to posterity.

To plant trees is to work toward cultivating change, in the fullest sense of that phrase. In an era of widening social inequity and unshared growth, the replenished forest can offer an egalitarian, participatory image of growth—growth as sustainable over the long haul.¹⁸ The Moi regime vilified Maathai as an enemy of growth, development, and progress, all discourses the ruling cabal had used to mask its high-speed plunder. Saplings in hand, the Green Belt Movement returned the blighted trope of growth to its vital, biological roots.

To plant a tree is an act of intergenerational optimism, a selfless act at once practical and utopian, an investment in a communal future the planter will not see; to plant a tree is to offer shade to unborn strangers. To act in this manner was to secede ethically from Kenya's top-down culture of ruthless short-term self-interest. (Kenyan intellectuals used to quip that under Moi *l'état c'est Moi*.)¹⁹ A social movement devoted to tree planting, in addition

to regenerating embattled forests, thus also helped regenerate an endangered vision of civic time. Against the backdrop of Kenya's winner-takes-all-and-takes-it-now kleptocracy, the movement affirmed a radically subversive ethic—an ethic of selflessness—allied to an equally subversive timeframe, the *longue durée* of patient growth for sustainable collective gain.

By 1998, the Moi regime had come to treat tree planting as an incendiary, seditious act of civil disobedience. That year, the showdown between the Green Belt Movement and state power came to a head over the 2,500-acre Karura Forest. Word spread that the regime was felling swathes of the public forest, a green lung for Nairobi and a critical catchment area for four rivers.²⁰ The cleared, appropriated land was being sold on the cheap to cabinet ministers and other presidential cronies who planned to build luxury developments on it—golf courses, hotels, and gated communities. Maathai and her followers, armed with nothing but oak saplings, with which they sought to begin replanting the plundered forest, were set upon by guards and goons wielding pangas, clubs, and whips. Maathai had her head bloodied by a panga; protestors were arrested and imprisoned.

The theatre of the tree has accrued a host of potent valences at different points in human history: both the planting and the felling of forests have become highly charged political acts. In the England that the Puritans fled, for example, trees were markers of aristocratic privilege; hence on numerous occasions, insurrectionists chopped or burned down those exclusionary groves. After the Restoration, notes Michael Pollan, “replanting trees was regarded as a fitting way for a gentleman to demonstrate his loyalty to the monarchy, and several million hardwoods were planted between 1660 and 1800.”²¹ By contrast, early American colonists typically viewed tree felling as an act of progress that could double as a way of improving the land and laying claim to it.

Since the early 1970s, a strong but varied transnational tradition of civil disobedience has gathered force around the fate of the forest. In March 1973, a band of hill peasants in the isolated Himalayan village of Mandal devised the strategy of tree hugging to thwart loggers who had come to fell hornbeam trees in a state forest on which the peasants depended for their livelihood. This was the beginning of a succession of such protests that launched India's Chipko movement. Three years later, in the Brazilian Amazon, Francisco Chico Mendes led a series of standoffs by rubber tappers and

their allies who sought to arrest uncontrolled felling and burning by rancher colonists.²² In Thailand, a Buddhist monk was jailed when he sought to safeguard trees by ordaining them, while Julia Butterfly Hill achieved celebrity visibility during her two-year tree sit to protest the clear-cutting of endangered California redwoods.

What distinguished the Green Belt Movement, like the Chipko movement before it, was the way that activists protesting deforestation went beyond what would become standard strategies of environmental civil disobedience in the global North (sit-ins, tree hugging, or chaining oneself to a tree). For the Kenyan and Indian protestors, active reforestation became the primary symbolic vehicle for their civil disobedience. Under an undemocratic dispensation, the threatened forest can be converted into a particularly dramatic theatre for reviving civic agency because it throws into relief incompatible visions of public land. To Kenya's authoritarian president, the forest was state owned, and because he and his cronies treated the nation as identical to the state, he felt at license to fell national forests and sell off the nation's public land. To the activists, by contrast, the forest was not a private presidential fiefdom, but commonage, the indivisible property of the people. The regime's contemptuous looting of Karura Forest was thus read as symptomatic of a wider contempt for the rights of the poor.

The Green Belt Movement's campaign to replant Karura assumed a potency that reverberated beyond the fate of one particular forest; their efforts served as a dramatic initiative to repossess, for the polity, not just plundered public land and resources, but plundered political agency. Outrage over the Karura assaults soon swelled to students and other disaffected groups in Nairobi, until the regime was forced to suspend its attacks on both the women and the trees. In this way, the theatre of the tree fortified the bond between a beleaguered environment and a beleaguered polity.²³

For those who perpetrate slow violence, their greatest ally is the protracted, convoluted vapor trail of blame. If slow violence typically occurs in the passive voice—without clearly articulated agency—the attritional deforestation of Karura and other public lands offered a clearer case of decisive accountability than, say, soil erosion. The Green Belt Movement's theatre of the tree inverted the syntax of violence by naming the agents of destruction. Through the drama of the axed tree and the planted sapling, Maathai and her allies staged a showdown between the forces of incremental violence

and the forces of incremental peace; in so doing they gave a symbolic and dramatic shape to public discontent over the official culture of plunder. Ultimately, Maathai saw in the culture of tree planting a way of interrupting the cycle of poverty, a cycle whereby, as she put it, “poverty is both a cause and a symptom of environmental degradation.”²⁴

Colonialism, Mau Mau, and the Forest in National Memory

In using the theatre of the forest to reanimate political debate around ideas of sustainable growth, grassroots democracy, erosion of rights, and the seeds of change, Maathai and her resource rebels also tapped into a robust national memory of popular resistance to colonialism—above all, resistance to the unjust seizure of land.²⁵ Maathai’s memoir doesn’t engage this question of anticolonial memory directly, but it is surely pertinent to the political traction that her movement attained given the particular place of the forest in Kenya’s national symbolic archive of resistance. The confrontation, during Moi’s neocolonial rule, between the forces of deforestation and the forces of reforestation was played out against the historic backdrop of the forest as a redoubt of anticolonialism, a heroic place that, during the Mau Mau uprising from 1952 to 1958, achieved a mythic potency among both the British colonialists and those Kenyans—primarily Kikuyu—who fought for freedom and the restitution of their land.²⁶

In the dominant colonial literature about Mau Mau (political tracts, memoirs, and fiction), the forest appears as a place beyond reach of civilization, a place of atavistic savagery where “terrorists” banded together to perform degenerate rites of barbarism.²⁷ For those Kenyans who sought an end to their colonial subjugation, the forest represented something else entirely: it was a place of cultural regeneration and political refusal, a proving ground where resistance fighters pledged oaths of unity, above all, an oath to reclaim, by force if necessary, their people’s stolen land.

The forest thus became the geographical and symbolic nexus of a peasant insurrection, as a host of Kenyan writers, Meja Mwangi, Wachira, Mangua, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o among them, have all testified.²⁸ From an environmental perspective, *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi’s novel of the Mau Mau uprising, is particularly suggestive. As Byron Caminero-Santangelo

observes, most of the novel's British characters work at the Githima Forestry and Agricultural Research Station, an institution whose official aims are to advance agriculture and conservation, but which was founded "as part of a new colonial development plan."²⁹ The novel unfolds in part, then, as a clash between rival cultures of nature: between nature as instrument of colonial control (under the guise of development) and nature as a sustaining animist force, an anticolonial ally of Mau Mau forest fighters pledging oaths of liberation.³⁰

The gender politics of all this are complex and compelling. In the 1950s, the forest served as a bastion not just of anticolonialism but of warrior masculinity. Thirty years later, it was nonviolent women, armed only with oak saplings and a commitment to civil disobedience, who embodied the political resistance to neocolonialism. So the showdown at Karura reprised the anticolonial history of forest resistance in a different key: now the core fighters—Maathai's "foresters without diplomas"—were female and unarmed.³¹ Does this double rescripting of resistance help explain the particularly vicious backlash against the women from Kenya's male political establishment?

Intersectional Environmentalism, Gender, and Conservation

The colonial backdrop to the achievements of the Green Belt Movement surfaces not just through the memory of Mau Mau forest fighters but also through the contrast between colonial conservation and what one might call intersectional environmentalism. Maathai was never a single-issue environmentalist: she sought, from the outset, to integrate and advance the causes of environmental, women's, and human rights by engendering stronger civic institutions. The Green Belt Movement emerged in the late 1970s under the auspices of the women's movement: it was through Maathai's involvement in the Kenya Association of University of Women that she was first invited to join a local Environment Liaison Centre and from there was approached by representatives from the United Nations Environmental Programme, which led in turn to ever-widening circles of international access.³²

Maathai's intersectional approach to environmental justice contrasted starkly with the dominant colonial tradition of conservation, which had

focused on charismatic megafauna.³³ That sharply masculinist tradition—in Kenya and, more broadly, in East and Southern Africa—was associated with forced removal, with colonial appropriation of land, and with an antihuman ecology. That tradition remains part of Kenya’s economic legacy, a legacy associated not just with human displacement but with local exclusion from elite cultures of leisure. In ecological as in human terms, Maathai’s angle of approach was not top down: instead of focusing on the dramatic end of the biotic chain—the elephants, rhinos, lions, and leopards that have preoccupied colonial hunters, conservationists, and foreign tourists—she drew attention to a more mundane and pervasive issue: the impact of accumulative resource mismanagement on biodiversity, soil quality, food security, and the life prospects of rural women and their families.

As Fiona Mackenzie’s research reveals, the grounds for such resource mismanagement were laid during the colonial era when conservationist and agricultural discourses of “betterment” were often deployed in the service of appropriating African lands. Focusing on colonial narratives about the environment and agriculture in the Kikuyu reserves between 1920 and 1945, Mackenzie traces the effects of the colonial bureaucracy’s authoritarian paternalism, of what James C. Scott calls “the imperial pretensions of agronomic science.”³⁴ Not least among these deleterious effects was “the recasting of the gender of the Kikuyu farmer . . . through a colonial discourse of betterment that was integrally linked to the reconstruction of agricultural knowledge.”³⁵ Thus—and this has profound consequences for the priorities of the Green Belt Movement—colonial authorities failed to acknowledge women as primary cultivators. This refusal had the effect of diminishing the deeply grounded, adaptable knowledge (both ecological and agricultural) that women had amassed.

Maathai’s refusal to subordinate the interwoven questions of environmental and social justice to the priorities of either spectacular conservation or industrial agriculture has proven crucial to the long-term adaptability of the GBM, allowing the movement to regenerate itself by improvising alliances with other initiatives for sustainable security and democratic transformation. Although it was the theatre of tree planting that initially garnered Maathai and her allies media attention and international support, they expanded the circles of their activism, mobilizing for campaigns that ranged from the release of Kenya’s political prisoners to debt forgiveness for

impoverished nations. The Green Belt Movement's intersectional strategy helped integrate issues of attritional environmental violence into a broad movement for political answerability that, in turn, helped lead to democratic elections in Kenya in 2002.

The positioning of the GBM at the crossroads between environmental rights and women's rights makes historic sense. Women in Kenya have borne the brunt of successive waves of dispossession, dating back to the late nineteenth century, when the British colonialists shifted the structures of land ownership to women's detriment. Previously, land had belonged inalienably to the extended family or clan; with the introduction of colonial taxation that same land became deeded to a male deemed to be head of the household. As taxation forced more and more Kenyans into a wage economy, and as (first under colonialism and later under neocolonial structural adjustment) cash crops like tea, coffee, and sugar cane shrank the arable land available for food production, women became disproportionately marginalized from economic power. In the resultant cash economy, men typically owned the bank accounts.³⁶

Rural women suffered the perfect storm of dispossession: colonial land theft; the individualizing and masculinizing of property; and the experience of continuing to be the primary tillers of the land under increasingly inclement circumstances, including soil erosion and the stripping of the forests. As forests and watersheds became degraded, it was the women who had to walk the extra miles to fetch water and firewood; it was the women who had to plough and plant in once rich but now denuded land where, without the anchorage of trees, topsoil was washed and blown away. In this context, the political convergence of the campaigns for environmental and women's rights in Kenya made experiential sense: women inhabited the betrayals of successive narratives of development that had brutally excluded them. The links between attritional environmental violence, poverty, and malnutrition was a logic they lived. So when the Moi regime laid claim to Karura Forest and Uhuru Park for private "development" schemes, Maathai was able to mobilize women who had historically been at the raw end of plunder that benefited minute male elites, be they colonial or neocolonial in character.

It is a measure of the threat that this intersectional environmentalism posed that in 1985 the regime demanded (ultimately without success)

that the women's movement and the green movement disengage from one another.³⁷ What the regime foresaw was that these women tending saplings in their rural nurseries were seeding a civil rights movement that could help propel a broader campaign for an end to direct and indirect violence in the name of greater political answerability.

The repeated showdowns between the GBM-led civil rights movement and Kenya's authoritarian regime offer a salient reminder that, for all the elaborate, often invaluable theorizing about cosmopolitanism and globalization, the nation-state remains a potent actor, in societies as diverse as Kenya, Venezuela, Indonesia, China, and India. Yet in much contemporary environmental thinking in the humanities, the nation-state is either overlooked entirely or treated as a quaint anachronism. The struggles and successes of the GBM clearly cannot be understood outside the particular dynamics of Kenya's national authoritarianism. That said, they also cannot be viewed solely within a national frame: local and global geopolitics contributed in complex, often unpredictable ways. For if the forces arrayed against the movement were primarily from the ruling national elite, the resources Maathai drew on combined a national memory bank of anti-colonial resistance, meticulously local forms of organization and cultural knowledge, and expansively transnational alliances. On the one hand, the Green Belt Movement recognized that, to operate in a country where sixty-two languages are spoken, it was essential to work with teams of women fluent in the local tongue, conversant with local power dynamics, and possessing local environmental knowledge. On the other hand, the movement gained indispensable traction through support from the United Nations and Scandinavian funders.

The United States played a complex role, as it would in the rise of Ken Saro-Wiwa's Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People. If one of Saro-Wiwa's primary adversaries was American petro-giant Gulf Chevron, operating collaboratively with Nigerian authoritarianism, in Kenya (a detail Maathai omits from her memoir) the American government refused to turn the screws on President Moi because they perceived him as a friendly authoritarian and valuable ally close to the volatile Horn of Africa. That said, both Maathai and Saro-Wiwa traveled to the United States and drew inspiration from the civil rights and environmental campaigns they witnessed there. That inspiration was profoundly personal but it was also—and

crucially—rhetorical, granting each a vocabulary that helped them achieve an international resonance for what might otherwise have remained obscure campaigns for environmental justice for their nation’s or region’s poor.

In 1960 Maathai became one of 600 Kenyans airlifted to the United States under the Kennedy program. (When she published her memoir she couldn’t have foreseen how consequential that 1960 program would be: accompanying her on that airlift was a young Kenyan named Barack Obama on scholarship to the University of Hawaii.) As a beneficiary of the Kennedy airlift, Maathai got to study at a small college in Kansas; she proceeded for her graduate work to the University of Pittsburgh and, while there, was energized by listening to Martin Luther King at the height of his powers, an experience that contributed to her intersectional attitude to movement politics, whereby she would envisage environmentalism as one wing of a broader civil rights campaign. A few years after returning to Kenya, she and her early collaborators chose Earth Day to launch the GBM. She thus drew inspiration from her exposure to the civil rights movement and from a decisive event in the organizational history of the American environmental movement, while simultaneously adapting to Kenyan circumstances both of those animating precedents. In both instances, moreover, a movement’s ascent was intimately connected, in sometimes complicating ways, with an iconic figurehead, be it Martin Luther King or Gaylord Nelson. What Maathai could not have foreseen was the way the relationship between her iconic visibility and anonymous collective action would compound her vulnerability to attack.

Collective Activism and Genres of the Self

Maathai’s account of her sojourn in the United States is shaped by a series of conventions, as the chapter title, “American Dream,” suggests. Those conventional pressures surface most forcefully in *Unbowed* in the domain of genre: if her first book, a little-noticed manual on the Green Belt Movement, had a collective center, by the second book, a memoir commissioned by an American publisher in response to her Nobel Prize, she clearly felt greater pressure to recast that collective history as a personal journey with a singular autobiographical self as its gravitational center.

Maathai was one of seven women who founded the Green Belt Movement, yet in *Unbowed* the other women never achieve any definition as

characters. I observe this less as a criticism than as a way of signaling the intractable dilemmas that attend the movement memoir.³⁸ To underscore this point: after Nelson Mandela emerged from prison, Little, Brown and Company paid him a high six-figure advance for his autobiography. On becoming president, he predictably fell behind with his writing, so his publisher dispatched an American ghostwriter to help speed things along. The ghostwriter discovered, to the publisher's consternation, that Mandela's autobiography had advanced with only a smattering of "I's"; his preferred, default personal pronoun was "we" as in "we, the ANC." The ghostwriter was tasked with disaggregating that movement "we" and channeling it into an "I" story that American readers and *Oprah* viewers would recognize and respond to. For Maathai, as for Mandela, the single-authored movement memoir raises profound representational dilemmas intricately entangled with transnational power imbalances in the publishing industry—entangled, too, with the genre expectations of projected readers, who reside mostly in the global North. Maathai's 2004 Nobel Peace Prize—and with it, the publishers' investment in a celebrity memoir—intensified the pressure on the writer to recast a collective struggle in largely personal terms. Under such circumstances, to testify is to confirm certain genre expectations and thereby to shape the way political movements, not least environmental justice movements, are narrated and remembered.

Although *Unbowed* is subtitled "A Memoir," that someone odd designation seems symptomatic of the mood of American publishing in the early 21st century, when "memoir" was a hipper, more saleable category than the fusty-sounding "autobiography" to which *Unbowed* more properly belongs. The memoirs that boosted the genre's visibility, sales, and cultural cachet—Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss*, Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club*, Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, Marya Hornbacher's *Wasted*, Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called It*, Augusten Burrough's *Running with Scissors*, and James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*—typically focused on a specific trauma (addiction, incest, bulimia) and had a narrow social frame, centered on familial dysfunction. They were written by unknown figures and read largely for their intimate, sometimes scandalously, confessional tone. By contrast, *Unbowed* unfolds across a vast social canvas, is focused on a dysfunctional nation-state rather than a dysfunctional individual or family, and is authored by a woman of international renown. If this is a "misery memoir" then the primary source of that misery

is a patriarchal, authoritarian nation-state and the solution is not some personal twelve-step plan but collective dissidence which, in the writing, gets routed through an iconic individual life.

By contemporary American memoir standards, *Unbowed* is wholesome, quite private, even withholding. As such the book has more in common with the older autobiographical tradition of, say, Ben Franklin, where the focus is on the grand sweep of a lifetime's accomplishments. Maathai is less prone to self-hagiography than Franklin, but she is similarly inclined toward extracting lessons, even parables, from experiences: that hard work pays off; that, in her words, she needed "to pull myself up by my bootstraps;" how the values instilled in her as a child stood her in good stead; how morality and optimism will see off adversity. In contrast to most contemporary American memoirists, Maathai represents her childhood and family as profoundly functional to the point of being idealized. Pitched somewhere between *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* and Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (with an environmental, feminist twist), Maathai's narrative is didactic and solution-oriented. In her complex balancing act between self-effacement and heroic self-fashioning, she has to translate, at every turn, her selfhood into forms amenable to her largely American audience.

Environmental Agency and Ungovernable Women: Carson and Maathai

Wangari Maathai and Rachel Carson each sought, in their different cultural milieus, to shift the parameters of what is commonly perceived as violence. They devoted themselves to questioning shibboleths about development and progress, to making visible the overlooked casualties of accumulative environmental injury, and to mobilizing public sentiment—especially among women—against the institutionalized deceptions and profitable complicities of a male power elite. Both writer-activists questioned the orthodox, militarized vision of security as sufficient to cope with the domino effects of exponential environmental risk, not least the intergenerational risk to food security.³⁹ Indeed, both saw the militarization of their societies—cold-war America of the late 1950s and early 1960s and Moi's tyrannized Kenya of the 1980s and 1990s—as exacerbating the environmental degradation that threatened long-term stability (locally, nationally, and transnationally).

Retrospectively, it is easy to focus on the achievements of these two towering figures: the social movements they helped build, the changes in legislation and public perception they helped catalyze, Maathai's Nobel Peace Prize, the selection of *Silent Spring* as the most influential work of nonfiction of the twentieth century. Yet it is important to acknowledge the embattled marginalization and vilification both women had to endure at great personal cost in order to ensure that their unorthodox visions of environmental violence and its repercussions gained political traction. Their marginality was wounding but emboldening, the engine of their originality.

Carson and Maathai were multiply extra-institutional: as female scientists (anomalies for their time and place); as scientists working outside the structures and strictures of the university; and as unmarried women. On all fronts, they had to weather ad feminam assaults from male establishments whose orthodoxies were threatened by their autonomy.

Although Carson had a master's degree in biology, financial pressures and the pressures of caring for dependent relatives had prevented her from pursuing a Ph.D. Her background was in public science writing; she had no university affiliation, at a time, one should add, when only one percent of tenured scientists in America were women.⁴⁰ But by the time she came to embark on *Silent Spring*, her best-selling books on the sea had given her some financial autonomy. Carson's institutional and economic independence freed her to set her own research agenda, to engage in unearthing, synthesizing and promoting environmental research that had been suppressed or sidelined by the funding priorities of the major research institutions, whose agendas she recognized as compromised by the entangled special interests of agribusiness, the chemical and arms industries, and by the headlong rush to profitable product development.

Carson's detractors questioned her professional authority, her patriotism, her ability to be unemotional, and the integrity of her scientific commitment to intergenerational genetic issues, given that she was a "spinster." "Why is a spinster with no children so concerned about genetics? She is probably a Communist," a former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture intoned.⁴¹

Hostile reviewers dismissed Carson's arguments as "hysterically over-emphatic" and as "more emotional than accurate."⁴² The general counsel for Velsicol, a Chicago chemical company, accused Carson of being under the sway of "sinister influences" whose purpose was "to reduce the use of

agricultural chemicals in this country and the countries of western Europe, so that our supply of food will be reduced to east-curtain parity.”⁴³ Other commentators deduced that “Miss Rachel Carson’s reference to the selfishness of insecticide manufacturers probably reflects her Communist sympathies.”⁴⁴ Carson’s nemesis, the chemical industry spokesman Dr. Robert White-Stevens (who gave twenty-eight speeches against *Silent Spring* in a single year) opined that “if man were to faithfully follow the teachings of Miss Carson, we would return to the Dark Ages.”⁴⁵ In the ultimate vilification of Carson as embodying a model of irrational female treachery, a critic in *Aerosol Age* concluded that “Miss Carson missed her calling. She might have used her talents in telling war propaganda of the type made famous by Tokyo Rose and Axis Sally.”⁴⁶

Twenty-five years on and Maathai’s opponents were brandishing even more outrageous ad feminam threats and insinuations against an autonomous female scientist who threatened the political and environmental status quo. Maathai was not a “spinster,” but she was a divorcée, a label her opponents wielded against her relentlessly. Like Carson, she was represented as overly emotional and unhinged, an unnatural woman, uncontrollable, unattached, without a husband to rein her in and keep her (and her ideas) respectable. If the chemical-agricultural establishment sought to dismiss Carson, who lacked a Ph.D., as unqualified to speak, Kenya’s power elite tried to discredit Maathai—the first woman in East or Central Africa to receive a doctorate in any scientific field—as suspiciously overqualified, as a woman who had to be brought down because she was overreaching.⁴⁷ When she led the protests against government plans for the private “development” of Uhuru Park, one parliamentarian declared, “I don’t see why we should listen to a bunch of divorced women.” Another politician portrayed her as a “madwoman”; a third threatened to “circumcise” her if she ever set foot in his district.⁴⁸

As a highly educated woman scientist, an advocate of women’s rights, and a proponent of environmentalism for the poor, Maathai was vulnerable, on multiple fronts, to charges of inauthenticity and, like Carson, of unpatriotic behavior. A Kenyan cabinet minister railed against Maathai as “an ignorant and ill-tempered puppet of foreign masters.”⁴⁹ Another criticized her for “not being enough of an African woman,” of being “a white woman in black skin.”⁵⁰ Such critics typically adhered to a gender-specific nativism: as Maathai notes,

Kenyan men freely adopted Western languages, Western dress, and the technological trappings of modernity, while expecting women to be the markers and bearers of “tradition.”⁵¹ President Moi (who imprisoned Maathai several times) chastised her for being “disobedient”; if she were “a proper woman in the African tradition—[she] should respect men and be quiet.”⁵²

As Kwame Anthony Appiah has observed, the charge of inauthenticity is an inherently unstable one:

Nativists may appeal to identities that are both wider and narrower than the nation: to ‘tribes’ and towns, below the nation-state; to Africa, above. And, I believe, we shall have the best chance of re-directing nativism’s power if we challenge not the rhetoric of the tribe, the nation, or the continent, but the topology that it presupposes, the opposition it asserts.⁵³

This is certainly borne out in Maathai’s case: she fell foul of proliferating “uns”—un-African, un-Kenyan, un-Kikuyu, unpatriotic, ungovernable, unmarried, unbecoming of a woman. But through her intersectional environmentalism she sought to circumvent the binaries of authentication. One strategy she used to sidestep such oppositional topologies was to seek out local environmental practices that were consistent with but not necessarily reducible to notions like biodiversity, the commons, and ecological stewardship. So, for example, Maathai recounts the Kikuyu injunction against cutting down fig trees which, with their widespread root systems and broad canopies help anchor sandbanks and shade vulnerable streambeds.⁵⁴ That injunction, passed down to her in childhood by her grandmother, serves in her narrative to foreshadow the green values that, on returning from America, she rescripts in the discourse of environmental science. As a “been-to” (a returnee from the West) and a go-between, Maathai ends up tacking back and forth strategically between nativist declarations (“I’m a child of my native soil”) and invocations of a cosmopolitan science.⁵⁵ By positioning herself as a transnational patriot with deep local roots, and by assiduously striving to reconcile her commitment to Kenya and to planetary values, Maathai seeks to deflect charges of treachery. So, too, she is careful not to articulate her views on women and tradition through a universalized feminism, but by invoking counter-currents within Kikuyu cultural practices.

In these ways, we witness Maathai actively trying to defuse the accusation that her behavior is unwomanly and that her purported triple betrayal (of her gender, her culture, and her nation) is indissociable from her role as a Westernized agent of “green imperialism.”

The vehement attacks on Maathai and Carson are a measure both of institutionalized misogyny and of how much is at stake (politically, economically, and professionally) in keeping the insidious dynamics and repercussions of slow violence concealed from view. While personally vulnerable, Maathai and Carson were threatening because they stood outside powerful systems of scientific patronage, academic intimidation, and silencing kickbacks. Their cultural contexts differed widely, but their extrainstitutional positions allowed them the scientific autonomy and political integrity to speak out against attritional environmental violence and help mobilize against it.

Quotidian Terrors

If Maathai’s nativist detractors sought to discredit her as an enemy of national development, , when awarded the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize she faced, a different style of criticism from abroad. Carl I. Hagen, leader of Norway’s Progress Party, typified this line of aggressive disbelief: “It’s odd,” Hagen observed “that the [Nobel] committee has completely overlooked the unrest that the world is living with daily, and given the prize to an environmental activist.”⁵⁶ The implications of Hagen’s position are clear: nineteen months into the Iraq War and, amidst the war in Afghanistan, the wider “war on terror,” and tumult in the Middle East, Congo, Sudan, and elsewhere, to honor an environmentalist for planting trees was to trivialize conflict resolution and to turn one’s back on the most urgent issues of the hour.

Maathai, however, sought to recast the question of urgency in a different time frame, one that challenged the dominant associations of two of the early twenty-first century’s most explosive words: “preemptive” and “terror.” The Green Belt Movement focused not on conventional *ex post facto* conflict resolution but on conflict preemption through nonmilitary means. As Maathai insisted, “many wars are fought over natural resources. In managing our resources and in sustainable development we plant the seeds of peace.”⁵⁷ This approach has discursive, strategic, and legislative ramifications for the “global war on terror.” Most of our planet’s people face more

immediate terrors than a terrorist attack: creeping deserts that reduce farms to sand; the incremental assaults of climate change compounded by deforestation; not knowing where tonight's meal will come from; unsafe drinking water; having to walk five or ten miles to collect firewood to keep one's children warm and fed. Such quotidian terrors haunt the lives of hundreds of millions immiserated, abandoned, and humiliated by authoritarian rule and by a purportedly postcolonial new-world order. Under such circumstances, slow violence (often coupled with direct repression) can ignite tensions, creating flashpoints of desperation and explosive rage.⁵⁸

"Local disasters," writes Wai Chee Dimock, "are the almost predictable side effects of global geopolitics. They are part of a larger distributive pattern—a pattern of unequal protection that Ulrich Beck calls the global 'risk society'—with the risk falling on the least privileged, and being maximized at just those points where the resources have been most depleted."⁵⁹ Dimock is reflecting here on the impact on the poor of the prelude to and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, yet her words apply with equal force to contemporary Kenya and many other societies in the global South, where structures of slow violence sustain tinderbox conditions that cynical political elites can readily ignite at great cost to a society's systemically disenfranchised.

Perhaps to Hagen and others like him, tree planting is conflict resolution lite; it lacks a dramatic, decisive, newsworthy military focus. But Maathai, by insisting that resource bottlenecks impact sustainable security at local, national, and global levels, and by insisting that the environmentalism of the poor is inseparable from distributive justice, has done more than forge a broad political alliance against Kenyan authoritarian rule. Through her testimony and through her movement's collective example, she has sought to reframe conflict resolution for an age when instant cinematic catastrophe has tended to overshadow violence that is calamitous in more insidious ways. This, then, is Wangari Maathai's contribution to the "war on terror": building a movement committed, in her words, to "reintroducing a sense of security among ordinary people so they do not feel so marginalized and so terrorized by the state."⁶⁰

86. Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Genocide in Nigeria*, 91.
87. Mouawad, “Shell Agrees to Settle Abuse Case,” B5.
88. Okonta and Douglas, *Where Vultures Feast*, 204.
89. *Ibid.*, 163.
90. Watts, *Curse of the Black Gold*, 197.
91. Mouawad, “Shell Agrees to Settle Abuse Case,” B5.
92. Okonta and Douglas, *Where Vultures Feast*, 112.
93. Quoted in Watts, *Curse of the Black Gold*, 217.
94. *Ibid.*, 44.
95. Xan Rice, “Oil Find Sparks New Hope for Uganda’s People,” *Guardian (London)*, August 25, 2009, 11.

4. Slow Violence, Gender, and the Environmentalism of the Poor

1. Anna Lappe and Frances Moore Lappe, “The Genius of Wangari Maathai,” *International Herald Tribune*, October 15, 2004, 1–2.
2. Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed: A Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 175.
3. Lester R. Brown, “The Price of Salvation,” *Guardian*, April 25, 2007, 1.
4. Hendrik Hertzberg, “The War in Iraq,” *New Yorker*, March 27, 2003, 15.
5. *Ibid.*
6. The insistence that shock and awe was the beginning of a war unprecedented in its humanitarian precision was heard across the political spectrum. Donald Rumsfeld, most memorably, insisted that the futuristic weaponry the United States deployed in the war exhibited “a degree of precision that no one dreamt of in a prior conflict,” resulting in bombings that were morally exemplary: “The care that goes into it, the humanity that goes into it, to see that military targets are destroyed, to be sure, but that it’s done in a way, and in a manner, and in a direction and with a weapon that is appropriate to that very particularized target. . . . I think that will be the case when ground truth is achieved” (United States Department of Defense, “DoD News Briefing—Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers,” March 21, 2003).
7. Wangari Maathai, *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (New York: Lantern Books, 2003), 38.
8. See especially Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (Boston: South End Press, 2005); and *Soil Not Oil: Environmental Justice in an Age of Climate Crisis* (Boston: South End Press, 2008).
9. Wes Jackson, “The Agrarian Mind: Mere Nostalgia or a Practical Necessity?” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Washington, DC: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2003), 141.
10. Maathai, *Unbowed*, 281.

11. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (1977; repr., London: Penguin, 2002).
12. Laura Wright, *Wilderness Into Civilized Shapes: Reading the Postcolonial Environment* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 33–35.
13. For a related and insightful discussion of what she calls “articulated categories,” see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 4ff.
14. Ato Quayson, *Calibrations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 73.
15. Meera Selva, “Wangari Maathai: Queen of the Greens,” *Guardian*, October 9, 2004, 9.
16. William Finnegan, “The Economics of Empire: the Washington Consensus,” *Harper's*, May 2003, 48.
17. Bertolt Brecht, “An die Nachgeborenen” (To posterity), in *Selected Poems*, trans. H. R. Hays (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 173.
18. The time frame here is crucial. With the help of international donors, Maathai put in place a system whereby each woman was paid a modest amount not for planting a tree, but for keeping it alive for six months. If it were still growing at that point, she would be remunerated. Thus the focus of the group's activities was not the single act of planting but maintaining growth over time. The literature on desertification is complex and conflicted, largely around questions of the scale and source of the problem as well as the quality of the research. Given the fraught debates over the implications of desertification, I have avoided the term, preferring simply to reference the slow violence of soil erosion and deforestation. For two useful accounts of the spread of positions on this issue, see Jeremy Swift, “Desertification: Narratives, Winners and Losers,” in *The Lie of the Land: Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment*, ed. Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns (Oxford: James Currey, 1996); and William M. Adams, “When Nature Won't Stay Still: Conservation, Equilibrium and Control,” in *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-Colonial Era*, ed. William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan (London: Earthscan, 2003).
19. Michela Wong, *It's Our Turn to Eat: The Story of a Kenyan Whistle-Blower* (New York: Harper 2009), 37.
20. Maathai, *Unbowed*, 262.
21. Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (New York: Dell, 1991), 194.
22. Ramachandra Guha, *Environmentalism: A Global History* (New York: Longman, 2000), 115–124.
23. A major precursor to the conflict over Karura had occurred in 1989. The regime had been steadily appropriating and privatizing parts of Nairobi's Uhuru Park, which Maathai has likened to New York's Central Park and London's Hyde Park as a vital green space, a space for leisure and for political gatherings. When

Maathai learned that the ruling party was to erect a sixty-story skyscraper for new party headquarters and a media center in Uhuru Park, battle was joined. Green Belt activists spearheaded a successful movement to turn back the regime's efforts to privatize public land under the deceptively spectacular iconography of national development. The regime would not forgive Maathai for humiliating them in this manner.

24. Amitabh Pal, "Maathai Interview," *Progressive*, May 2005, 5.
25. I've adapted the phrase from Al Gedicks' book, *Resource Rebels: Native Challenges to Mining and Oil Corporations* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2001).
26. For the history of the forest fighters, see Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Holt, 2005); Wunyabari O. Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); and especially David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: Norton, 2005), 230–288.
27. For the most comprehensive discussion of this literature, see David Maughan-Brown, *Land, Freedom and Fiction: History and Ideology in Kenya* (London: Zed Press, 1985).
28. The Mau Mau uprising was far from being an undivided revolt: numerous fault lines opened up at times, not least between educated nationalist leaders and the predominantly peasant forest fighters.
29. Byron Caminero-Santangelo, "Different Shades of Green: Ecocriticism and African Literature," in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, ed. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 702.
30. In many Kenyan novels about the Mau Mau period, the forest fighters are depicted with a cloying if understandable romanticism. On the complex and varied legacies of colonial cultures of nature, one notes Maathai's admiration for the Men of the Trees, an organization founded in Kenya in the 1920s that brought together British and Kikuyu leaders to promote tree planting (Maathai, *Unbowed*, 131).
31. Although the initial resistance came from the Green Belt Movement, the resistance spread to the streets of Nairobi, where it was taken up by a broad swath of the population, particularly students, both female and male.
32. Maathai, *Unbowed*, 120.
33. See William Beinart and Peter Coates, *Environmental History: The Taming of Nature in the U.S.A. and South Africa* (London: Routledge, 1995); Jane Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park: A Social and Political History* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Allen, 1995); and A. Fiona D. Mackenzie, "Contested Ground: Colonial Narratives and the Kenyan Environment, 1920–1945," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26 (2000): 697–718.

34. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 264.
35. Fiona Mackenzie, “Contested Ground,” 27. Mackenzie, like Beinart, stresses that there were among colonial officialdom some dissident voices who recognized the value and applicability of local agricultural and environmental knowledge.
36. Stuart Jeffries, “Kenya’s Tree Woman,” *Mail and Guardian*, February 28, 2007, 7.
37. Maathai, *Unbowed*, 179.
38. For an ambitious experiment in adaptively blending a singular self, a social movement, and a polemical agenda, see W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940; repr., New York: Transaction Publishers, 1983).
39. An important distinction should be made between the routes that Carson and Maathai took to their writing and their activism. Carson was a lifelong writer who remade herself as an activist late in life, after she traded her lyrical voice (which she’d honed as a celebrant of marine life) for the voice of elegy and apocalypse in *Silent Spring*. Maathai’s trajectory was in the opposite direction: an activist all her adult life, she became a writer of testimony only in her later years.
40. Linda Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (New York: Holt, 1997), 254.
41. Quoted in Lear, *Rachel Carson*, 429.
42. “Pesticides: The Price of Progress,” *Time*, September 28, 1962, 45. Quoted in Lear, *Rachel Carson*, 461. Additionally, a review by Carl Hodge was entitled “*Silent Spring* Makes Protest Too Hysterical,” *Arizona Star*, October 14, 1962, 7.
43. Quoted in Lear, *Rachel Carson*, 417.
44. Quoted *ibid.*, 409.
45. Quoted in “The Silent Spring of Rachel Carson,” transcript, *CBS Reports*, April 3, 1963.
46. Anon, “Controversial Book by Rachel Carson Lives Up to Advance Warnings,” *Aerosol Age*, October 1962, 81. I’m grateful to Lindsay Woodbridge for first drawing my attention to this review in her fine unpublished senior thesis, “The Fallout of Silent Spring” (University of Wisconsin-Madison, Women’s Studies, 2007).
47. This misogyny, together with the regime’s authoritarian intolerance of dissent, had profound professional and financial repercussions for Maathai. In 1982, after teaching at the University of Nairobi for sixteen years, she decided to run for parliament. To do so, she was told she had to resign from her job at the university. She was then promptly informed by the electoral committee that she was disqualified (on a trumped up technicality) from running for parliament. So, twelve hours after resigning as chair of the university’s Department of Veterinary Anatomy, Maathai asked for her job back. Under pressure from the regime, the university refused to reemploy her and, moreover, denied her

- all pension and health benefits. Maathai, a forty-one-year-old single mother with no safety net, was thrown out onto the streets. One notes that, in 2005, shortly after Maathai was awarded the Nobel Prize, the very university that had treated her so appallingly tried to cash in on her international fame by awarding her an honorary doctorate in science.
48. Meera Selva, “Wangari Maathai: Queen of the Greens,” *Guardian*, October 9, 2004, 8.
 49. Quoted in Jim Motavelli, “Movement Built on Power of Trees,” *E: The Environmental Magazine*, July–August 2002, 11.
 50. Maathai, *Unbowed*, 110.
 51. *Ibid.*, 111. For a more elaborate account of the burden of traditionalism placed on women in the context of a Janus-faced modernity, see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 294–300.
 52. Maathai, *Unbowed*, 115, 196. There are echoes between the nativist arguments mounted against Maathai by President Moi and the arguments of her ex-husband, Mwangi, who testified in court that he was divorcing her because she was ungovernable: “[T]oo educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn, and too hard to control” (quoted in *Unbowed*, 146).
 53. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 55.
 54. Maathai, *Unbowed*, 44–46.
 55. Maathai, *Unbowed*, 4.
 56. Quoted in Patrick E. Tyler, “In Wartime, Critics Question Peace Prize for Environmentalism,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2004, A5. Morten Hoeglund, a member of Norway’s Progress Party, concurred with Hagen, arguing that “the committee should have focused on more important matters, such as weapons of mass destruction” (quoted in Selva, “Wangari Maathai,” 9).
 57. Quoted in Patrick E. Tyler, “Peace Prize Goes to Environmentalism in Kenya,” *New York Times*, October 9, 2004, A5. See, for example, Maathai’s insistence that through a focus on reforestation and environmental resource management, “we might preempt many conflicts over the access and control of resources” (*Unbowed*, xvi).
 58. In Kenya, which boasts some forty ethnicities, the sources of ethnic tension are complex, but have often been especially explosive along the fault lines between pastoralists and farmers where resources are overstressed. Divisive politicians have manipulated these tensions to their advantage, for instance, during the violence that beset the Rift Valley, Nyanza, and Western provinces in the early 1990s and, more broadly, during the aftermath of the disputed national elections of 2007. The slow violence of resource depletion, a mistrust of government, and

- political leaders who play the ethnic card can easily kindle an atmosphere of terror that fuels social unrest.
59. Wai Chee Dimock, "World History According to Katrina," in *States of Emergency*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Susan Gillman (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 148. I have elaborated elsewhere on the environmental, class, and gender dimensions to the violent conflicts that swept through Kenya in the aftermath of the December 2007 elections. The widespread, reductive media portraits of the violence as simply an eruption of "atavistic tribal hatreds" ignores the profound socioenvironmental inequalities that were masked by the official portrait of Kenya as a nation, under Moi's successor, President Mwai Kibaki, of ascendant growth. See Rob Nixon, "Slow Violence, Gender, and the Environmentalism of the Poor," *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 13 (2008): 29–31.
 60. Quoted in Ofeibea Quist-Arcton, "Maathai: Change Kenya to Benefit People," <http://www.greenbeltmovement.org>.

5. Unimagined Communities

1. See especially Lawrine Platzky and Cheryl Walker, *The Surplus People: Forced Removals in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1998).
2. Quoted in Jacques Leslie, *Deep Water: The Epic Struggle over Dams, Displaced People, and the Environment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 156.
3. On the basis of a country report by the World Commission on Dams, Arundhati Roy puts the figure for India's dam-displaced at 56 million, while Patrick McCully argues that—prior to the Three Gorges project—Chinese dams alone may have displaced 60 million. See David Barsamian and Arundhati Roy, *The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2004), 25.
4. David Le Page, "World Bank Defends its Dam Policies," *Mail and Guardian*, May 2, 2001, 7.
5. Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
6. In *Savage Dreams*, Solnit commits herself to repopulating those places of cultural and imaginative evacuation. Her restorative ambitions are both temporal and spatial: she gives back to these deserts an environmental and cultural memory as well as connecting them globally, by tracing the cold-war links between Nevada and Kazakhstan. These links include new forms of imaginative awareness generated by a transnational protest movement.
7. Solnit, *Savage Dreams*, 154.
8. Across the world, the people who are reconstituted as uninhabitants seldom belong to large or powerful ethnic groups. This is true of all the desert nuclear test sites internationally: in the Nevada Test Site; in the deserts of Kazakhstan,