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Wangari Maathai’s Emplaced Rhetoric: Greening Global Peacebuilding

Ellen W. Gorsevski

This article offers new insights into how Wangari Maathai’s rhetoric of emplacement may be productively understood as a growing form of postcolonial communication, which is amenable to criticism and theory-building in rhetorical studies. Maathai’s emplaced rhetoric (ER) addressed postcolonial oppressions while emphasizing peacebuilding. ER is a form of postcolonial symbolic and discursive message-making found in a variety of communication contexts, often political, intercultural, and international exchanges about the environment. Prevailing literature on environmental communication features rhetorics that relate to colonial caused inequities, but little has been discussed in terms of connecting peacebuilding rhetoric of African women’s leadership to environmental sustainability. ER functions as a heuristic move to restore agency, interconnection and wholeness of sentient beings and ecosystems within the postcolonial context; it is the peacebuilder’s transcendence over dominant discourses that normalize displacement and fragmentation. This rhetorical analysis of recent texts of Maathai as a major peacebuilder in environmental and social justice activism serves as an antidote to the gap in contemporary criticism of postcolonial and environmental confluences in communication.

Keywords: Wangari Maathai; Emplaced rhetoric; Peacebuilding; Postcolonial; Environmental communication

Dr. Wangari Maathai won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for 30 years of reforestation work in her native Kenya, and for being a “strong voice speaking for the best forces in Africa to promote peace” (Nobel Committee, 2004). Maathai led projects across great swaths of Africa, where forest ecosystems and the people whose lives depended on them had been devastated by colonial and subsequent postcolonial development processes. With Maathai’s death in 2011, it is time to take stock of the rhetorical contributions for global greening of this remarkable African leader. This article
appraises Maathai’s communication, theorizing emplaced rhetoric (ER) as a significant and growing form of environmental discursive and symbolic action.

Maathai was a trailblazer. She was the first woman in East Central Africa to earn a doctoral degree and the first African woman and first environmentalist to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement (GBM) in 1977, engaging women to plant over 30 million trees in Africa. Before her GBM leadership, Maathai chaired the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK), “an umbrella organization for many of [Kenya’s]... women’s groups... [which] expanded beyond narrowly defined development issues to include political activism” (Worthington, 2003). Maathai believed renewing the balance of nature contributes to creating conditions for democracy and peace (UNEP, 2011). Her activism brought attention to the interconnection between environmental and social injustices (Davis & Selvidge, 2006; Stiehm, 2006).

From the late 1980s through 2002, Maathai vociferously criticized Kenya’s then president, Daniel arap Moi, who feared her green initiatives so much he called her “a threat to the order and security” of Kenya (as quoted in Goodman, 2005, p. 203). Until arap Moi’s exit from power, Maathai suffered beatings, jailings, and every other form of government intimidation. Undeterred, she emerged from decades of struggle as a world-revered figure for environmental justice Rhodes (2011). After serving in Kenya’s Parliament, in 2003, Maathai helped to lead the Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources, and Wildlife in Kenya’s new government. Today, Maathai’s legacy features the GBM and her life of activism in environmental and social politics (Kiama, 2011; UNEP, 2011). Maathai traveled worldwide speaking on environmental and economic empowerment issues, until her death, she continued to write prodigiously on a wide array of subjects for both expert and layperson audiences.

This article offers new insights into how Wangari Maathai’s rhetoric of emplacement may be productively understood as a growing form of what Shome (2002) and Schlimm (2010) identify as postcolonial communication, which is amenable to criticism and theory-building in rhetorical studies. As this case study of Maathai’s texts demonstrates, her communication not only featured resistance to postcolonial oppression, it also emphasized peacebuilding (Kiama, 2011). ER is a form of postcolonial symbolic and discursive message-making found in a variety of communication contexts, often political, intercultural and international exchanges about the environment. Prevailing literature on environmental communication features rhetoric that relates to colonial caused inequities, but little has been discussed in terms of connecting peacebuilding rhetoric of African women’s leadership to environmental sustainability (Steady, 2006). Moreover, as this study shows, ER may function as a heuristic move to restore agency, interconnection and wholeness of sentient beings and ecosystems within the postcolonial context; it is the peacebuilder’s transcendence over dominant discourses that normalize displacement and fragmentation. This rhetorical analysis of recent texts of Maathai as a major peacebuilder in environmental and social justice activism serves as an antidote to the gap in contemporary criticism of postcolonial and environmental confluences in communication.
This analysis covers Maathai’s suasive argumentation created for divergent audiences in Africa and beyond. Chief among her communication successes was her ability to navigate challenging limitations placed on women rhetors, made all the more, so since she underscored intersections between environmental and social justice for peacebuilding (Hayanga, 2006). Maathai’s contributions to communicating for environmental and social change featured her “persistence” in public protests for locally based environmental preservation and her “wisdom” in promoting peacebuilding while addressing local, regional, global, and multicultural audiences (Oniang’o et al., 2011, p. 516).

This article offers ER as a theoretically productive construct for assessing environmental rhetorics. Maathai was a rhetor and African peacebuilding leader who directly wielded global influence on environmental politics (Araeen, 2009; Tal, 2006; UNEP, 2011). Through her speeches, writings, activism, and the GBM, Maathai’s strong voice for environmental justice will continue to be amplified and heard for years to come (Kiama, 2011; Straziuso & Odula, 2011). Specifically, I survey Maathai’s ER, focusing on two recent texts where she describes her public campaigns from the late 1980s to 2006. Maathai’s texts that are analyzed here are *Unbowed: A Memoir* (2007), and her 88th Commencement Address at Connecticut College (2006).

Clearly, not all of Maathai’s communication constitutes ER. However, I contend ER is a noteworthy feature in contemporary environmental communication in postcolonial contexts, and that it is prominent in Maathai’s writings, speeches, and activism advancing ecological wellbeing and human rights. ER is evident in her most famous protests in Kenya to save park and forestlands from development, as conveyed in the passages from *Unbowed* (2007) that are explored here. This case study appreciates how Maathai used ER as a culture-bound and locale-situated approach to furthering modern social justice appeals within activist rhetoric about environmental sustainability. After surveying communication research on postcolonial environmental justice, ER is defined. I then analyze Maathai’s eco-activism texts as discursive and symbolic examples of Maathai’s uses of ER.

The Peacebuilding Turn in Environmental Politics: Communication Studies in Socio-Ecological Justice

researchers consider practices to constructively overturn past environmental violence thereby creating conditions for peace, a peace-building process of “positive peace.” In short, presently connections among rhetoric, environmental activism, and peace-building lag in the literature, especially when it comes to focusing on Africa (Vital, 2008). Further, in appreciating the rhetoric of black African women, even fewer studies exist (Wu, 2002). Wu asserts theory-building does not only happen on the level of heuristics. Theory is also deeply imbricated with what is deemed as subjects worthy of study. Wu maintains “dominant interpretive frameworks” largely omit women in developing nations from rhetorical studies (p. 81).


International environmental communication studies have tended to focus on non-African areas. Cotton and Motta (2011) linked environmental justice to international social justice, connecting divergent studies in the USA, Mexico, in Asian nations such as Vietnam, or Pacific islands like Tonga. Africa as a subject only appears in one essay in Sandler and Pezzullo’s (2007) volume on environmental and social justice; in that lone essay it is only in reference to African Americans, but not to Africans a continent away. Such studies insufficiently illuminate rhetoric of activism in and from Africa. Also, postcolonial peacebuilding is a culturally and historically specific process, one which must simultaneously address the ways that ecosystems were long damaged as a colonial means to controlling indigenous populations (Muthuki, 2006). Hence, while the study of cases in Western or Asian contexts abounds, research on the African continent lags (Vital, 2008; Wright, 2010).

To date communication research on peacebuilding environmental rhetoric by and about Africans appears to have advanced comparatively less than studies of other world zones. Among international studies of environmental communication, Worthington (2003) lamented “few studies have examined … politically active women” in Africa (p. 144). Add the category of women peacebuilders to that and we find even less attention has been paid to the rhetorical opus of the likes of important African women leaders such as Wangari Maathai (Stamp, 1995; Steady, 2006). Having thus summarized extant research on environmental communication in postcolonial contexts and the comparative dearth of studies relating to Africa among them, the following section defines ER.
Emplaced Rhetoric

Emplaced rhetoric is discursive and symbolic communication purveyed through public statements, visual imagery, and embodied forms of activism that emphasize the physical, lived world of earthly existence, and the numinous experience many persons gain from substantive connections to nature. ER's hallmarks often indicate fixed, physical places, such as national parks, that are widely valued in the socio-cultural sense as environmental spaces worthy of reverence and maintenance for posterity. Suasory messages of ER connect longstanding relationships between people and other sentient beings within the natural environment. A physical space that is symbolically inserted, via public communication, into a newly created political space encapsulates ER. ER functions as an environmental communication equivalent of a feminist standpoint, wherein out of crisis, conflict, and struggle, a person's or a group's consciousness is raised. ER broadcasts the value of interconnection among living persons, creatures, and their natural environment. That value consists of many dimensions, including cultural, social, political, economic, and historic.

In revered environmental places, resilient socio-cultural meanings propel values for sustaining, politically, and financially, the life and wildlife within that given physical space. For instance, Glacier National Park in the USA may be just as aesthetically beautiful as its counterpart, Yellowstone. Yet it is the infusion of greater public consciousness and continued relevance to public discourses that is more associated with Yellowstone, which renders Yellowstone more influential as a trope for environmental rhetoric and politics (Hall, Gilbertz, & Horton, 2007). Yellowstone serves as both a physical place and an icon of environmental preservation; its rhetorical function is to bind the ideal of natural preservation and environmentalism to American identity and national pride. Yellowstone also symbolizes postcolonial challenges. When it comes to grappling with symbols of domination of American Indians, the documentary film, *The Buffalo War* (Testa, 2001), revealed ways the last herd of buffalo in Yellowstone summons into public consciousness histories of white domination over Native Americans across the North American continent, renewing or recreating public meanings about what constitutes environmental justice. Yellowstone is a central trope and exemplar of ER in the American context; Yellowstone points to a possible means for peacebuilding to address past and unfolding socio-cultural injustices caused by anti-environmental practices.

To ascertain when ER is being used, critics may assess to what extent discursive, symbolic, or other forms of communication unite geo-situated places metaphorically with political spaces. Rhetorically significant places exist physically and are valued culturally, mustering multifaceted identities from the individual, community, or tribal level, to national and international levels of identity. Although nationality, for instance, is comprised of many variables beyond place, nonetheless the “placeness” of a nation is a core rhetorical element contributing to a given national identity (Biesecker, 2006; Dickinson, Ott & Aoki, 2006).

Emplaced rhetoric can function in and between macro and micro scales. For example, at a macro scale, consider the popular impact of NASA's famous images of
earth photographed from space. One photo, called “Earthrise,” photographed in 1968 by Apollo 8’s astronaut, William Anders, shows the bright blue top half of the Earth floating out in the blackness of space, with the gray cratered surface of the Moon in the foreground. A counterpart image, dubbed “The Blue Marble,” was photographed in 1972 during the last human visit to the Moon of Apollo 17; this photograph shows the whole orb of the Earth floating like a weightless blue marble in the pitch blackness of outer space. Anders describes how these striking images were perceived by fellow astronauts and the public to evoke environmental consciousness: “We came all this way to explore the moon, and the most important thing is that we discovered the Earth” (as cited in NASA, 2012, p. 1). NASA’s photographs indicate that place-based rhetoric can summon transcontinental, transnational, and transcultural consciousness about environmental interconnectedness on planet Earth. Goodell (2012) recalls that for the nascent “environmental movement, it [The Blue Marble] suggested how fragile and precious our planet really is” (p. 1). The earth from space photographs, then, functioned as ER in two ways: first, the images reiterated that despite the expansive size or range of locales there are on earth, audiences may feel connected to one another; and second, the photographs invited diverse audiences to experience a shared, unified perspective of planet Earth as not only a place, but also a shared home.

Diverse macro level exemplars of ER exist. Considering ER transnationally, Wright (2010) performed ecocriticism on contemporary texts, honoring the role of place in environmental conservation. At a regional scale, Giblett (2009), Jordan, Stallins, Stokes, Johnson, and Gragg (2011), and Sheppard (2010) noted the rhetorical and sociological import of aerial photographs of large scale environmental devastation caused by mining, factory pollution, and other large scale earth altering activities. Similarly, Robinson et al. (2001) showed ways satellite imagery augmented environmental conservation campaigns. Thus large or macro scale ER is a fixture in communication about environmental conservation.

At the smaller end of the scale spectrum, Greenberg (2008), Hoefel (1999), and Palmer (2005) examined texts in American environmental studies that could be characterized as ER. As examples of ER at a small scale level, analyses of Henry D. Thoreau’s famous naturalist treatise, Walden, were explored from literary (Greenberg, 2008) and ecological (Palmer, 2005) perspectives. These studies convey ways Walden was portrayed via ER, valuing the life system of a diminutive geographic place. ER appears in public communication over crises where historic preservation and environmental conservation meet, such as in ongoing debates over venerated sites succumbing to suburban sprawl (Capelouto, 2007; Zenzen, 1998). Thus political, cultural, and economic interests converge on a given place (Capelouto, 2007; Zenzen, 1998).

Further, conjoining an environmental standpoint to ethnic and cultural consciousness, Hoefel (1999) studied Zitkala-Sa’s American Indian activist essay, “Why I Am a Pagan.” Hoefel (1999) noted Zitkala-Sa’s strong voice allied her culture’s reverence for nature’s beauty and processes to ethnic pride, which enabled subsequent Native Americans to write in new ways, thereby regaining lost autonomy and agency.
Hoefel (1999) portrays Zitkala-Za’s environmentally grounded and politically progressive writing in ways that are consistent with ER. By raising awareness about ecological valuations of the interconnections between respecting sentient life and ecosystems, ER can be seen as a unifying means not only to resist environmental and cultural destruction, but also to actively create opportunities to foster political and social justice. Having defined ER, discussed its hallmarks, and given examples of ER from large, regional, and global macro scales to small, micro scales, the following section turns to examples of Maathai’s ER as the heart of this study.

Wangari Maathai’s Emplaced Rhetoric: Local Message, Global Reach

Wangari Maathai employed ER as a means to encourage people to reforest spaces in her native Kenya. She propelled into public consciousness the value of trees to national and international audiences (Davis & Selvidge, 2006; Hayanga, 2006; Stiehm, 2006). Chief among Maathai’s strengths was her ability to garner “extensive publicity,” which was heightened by her “charismatic leadership” and networking skills (Michaelson, 1994, p. 558). Maathai’s suasive discourses evinced a culturally bound sense of place by offering audiences a vivid sense of home and belonging using traditional African narratives that play equally well to Western audiences (KIRKSEY, 2007).

Using images matching a given audience to a narrative grounded in a sense of place, Maathai reminded her audiences of the riches in their own backyards, which may be lost in conditions of environmental imbalance. For instance, Maathai (2007) recalled, when she was a child, that “Managu, a green vegetable, flourished in maize fields after the harvest,” and that its “small, yellow, juicy berries sprouted amid the managu leaves. Whenever I was sent with my siblings to look after our sheep and goats as they grazed in the freshly cut fields, I would feast myself silly on those berries!” (p. 16). These vivid images of a rich, local, naturally occurring source of food show the connection between a healthy, thriving environment, and the sustenance of people living there. Maathai (2007) then contrasted this positive image from the past environmental status of thriving managu with the present day, lamenting, “Unfortunately, one does not see the managu plants a lot these days—one of the negative consequences of overcultivation and the use of agrochemicals” (p. 16). Statements such as these about the managu resound with a community-centric geography that contrasts sustainable indigenous practices with unsustainable methods. Maathai’s imagery reconnected physical bodies to (re)inhabit spaces such as fields abundant with managu. Her images conveyed meanings, both publically to show the outside impact of “agrochemicals,” and privately, in the personal moment of sharing a childhood joy like a “feast” of wild berries.

In terms of international dimensions of ER, Maathai’s discourses spanned national divides as contexts required. Maathai used community-oriented calls to reinvigorate environmental appreciation in Kenyans locally and Africans regionally, especially when it came to linking education for girls and women to prosperity (Hayanga, 2006; Kiama, 2011). By her later years, Maathai drew audiences to an urgent sensibility of international community responsibility (UNEP, 2011). For instance, in her CC
speech, Maathai (2006) echoed macro scale environmental sentiment harkening to NASA’s Blue Marble image of earth, saying:

The Norwegian Nobel Committee wanted to send a new message to the world . . . to persuade us as a human family to recognize that on this planet Earth the resources are limited. But it was only the Norwegian Nobel Committee that could say [it] with such conviction and voice and strength that the whole world will pay attention to the fact that there is a linkage between the way we use our resources on this planet and peace (p. 4)

Here, Maathai reminded her audience that life on earth depends on each member of the “human family” who must care for limited “resources.” Using kinship as a term to transcend international and intercultural differences, she also emphasized the magnitude of her having been selected as the very first environmentalist to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Thus, the connection to peace in this passage occurs through what Quinn (1982) classified as a “double metonymy,” known as a metalepsis (p. 54). Maathai’s use of “family” invokes the individual audience member’s placement within a specific, micro scale, nuclear family, while also summoning the audience as an interconnected whole of the broader “human family” to their physical placement on “planet Earth.” Maathai’s metalepsis conjoins physical and communitarian senses of place with humans’ responsibilities to secure a place of geopolitical peace through sound environmental stewardship.

Maathai’s Emplaced Rhetoric in Praxis

During Kenya’s difficult years under arap Moi’s regime, which had little regard for its people and for Kenya’s rich, natural environment, Mathaai was arrested many times, and was once even forced into hiding. Most suppressive actions backfired, however, because Maathai channeled them to garner attention for the cause of natural resources preservation. Maathai recruited large numbers of local supporters, especially women, to protest, creating shame and outcry over human-made, government-sanctioned environmental disasters. In one of the most dramatic spectacles Maathai staged, in 1989 she and hundreds of other women took over Nairobi’s famed Uhuru Park, a national treasure akin to New York’s Central Park, which was threatened with development by Moi’s government. Moi had plans underway to build a 62-story high-rise building and a gigantic, four-story sized statue of him, à la Lenin, along with shopping malls and parking lots for 2,000 cars in the pristine National Park. In a directed letter writing and park occupation campaign, Maathai (2007) organized to protest what she described as the “shocking” construction of an “absurd” complex obliterating park space filled with “stands of trees [that] provide millions of people in Nairobi with a natural environment for recreation, gatherings, quiet walks, or simply a breath of fresh air” (pp. 184–186).

In Maathai’s publicizing of problems of the proposed construction project, she frequently used rhetoric highlighting the public value of places like this park. Worthington’s (2003) study found that early in the protest, Kenya’s media “adopted
Maathai’s rhetoric . . . [suggesting] . . . use of [the] . . . space could be equated with competing visions of national identity and with class conflict” (pp. 148–149). As Maathai (2007) made clear, “the heart of the issue” over the park combined “the right of everyone to enjoy green space, [and] the effort was also about getting Kenyans to raise their voices” so they could “reclaim their power” (p. 195). Beyond a public letter writing campaign aimed at Kenyan politicians and international stakeholders, Maathai also rallied with other women to take over the park’s space, standing and singing “We Shall Overcome” from the American civil rights movement. Maathai used rhetoric tying “environmental preservation to nationalism” (Worthington, 2003, p. 149). Also, by singing a song associated with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s use of non-violent activism, she connected environmental values to human rights.

Maathai and her followers remained, refusing to depart Uhuru Park until they had successfully secured the Kenyan public’s wholehearted support (Worthington, 2003). Maathai obtained cancelations from foreign investors to the project to block the proposed construction and save the park’s natural beauty for future generations (Gilson, 2005). The Uhuru Park protest exemplifies emplaced rhetorical action because in occupying the physical space of the park and in fostering public debate through letters published in national and international circles, Maathai raised awareness and created political space for environmental preservation (Vidal, 2011). As a mode of peacebuilding, Maathai’s activism directly confronted postcolonial economic imperatives instantiated by globalization (Hayanga, 2006; Vidal, 2011).

Maathai’s ER and action continued. In 1999 after she and her supporters were brutally attacked when they were planting trees at Nairobi’s Karura Public Forest to protest continued logging and sell-off of trees there, she called a press conference from her hospital bed and “signed her police report in blood from her head wound” (Graydon, 2005, p. 10). Maathai (2007) recalled, “I wouldn’t be silenced or deterred from telling the truth and I wouldn’t go away” (p. 221). Thus, instead of backing down as the government expected, she turned the table. Maathai used the moment to increase public awareness of unsavory governmental behavior on Kenya’s environment and its citizens, which was symbolized in two ways. The first symbol was the destruction of forestlands; the second symbol was the beating up of unarmed women like herself who were trying to protect what remained of the forest. A deep understanding of and connection to physical and socio-political topography is evident in ER. Maathai (2007) described how community-based awareness and connections helped the protest she led to save Karura’s forestlands:

Fortunately for us, the authorities did not think about the possibility of our entering the forest through the strip of marshlands about 300 yards across the border on the north side of Karura. Having been denied entry through the main gates, and knowing there were guards at the other entry points to the forest, we decided that going through the marshes was our only option. Once more our unofficial network of informers helped by providing us with a guide who knew his way through the swampy area. A group of about 20—the women hitching up their dresses, the men rolling up their trousers, and all of us removing our shoes—stepped into the wet ground, using the footprints of our guide in front of us. I was armed with my watering can, and the press was with us, too. (p. 265)
In this passage, Maathai (2007) recognized the crucial importance of the support given to her and fellow environmental protesters by a social “network of informers,” by “the press,” and the physical placement of the marshlands. She praised the role of local community members who were well informed and forthcoming about advantageous topographical aspects of the landscape. She also noted the risk taken by supportive members of the community and the media who tagged along. Their courage was condensed into symbols of her “watering can” and the metonymy of the “press” as her non-violent weapons against armed guards. Here, her ER underscored the non-violent strategy. Outcomes of the protest depended on the convergence of physical, social, and political dimensions of environmental awareness put into practice.

For Maathai (2007), the Karura forestlands protest epitomized the ability of locals to fight “land grabbing,” whether it was in Kenya or in other parts of the world (p. 261). Garnering international allies ranging from the United Nations to Amnesty International, Maathai pressured Kenya’s government to acknowledge its greedy actions which reduced precious forest ecosystems to the status of mere retail goods. Maathai (2007) used place-based rhetoric to cast light on Kenyan citizens being blocked from using the public forest in ways that supported its purpose, like planting trees: “They were astonished to see me watering the seedlings in the nursery. The police thought they had the forest completely covered, and yet we had crept in” (Maathai, 2007, p. 265). Here she showed the non-violent activist strategy of persistence in doing an everyday, peaceful activity in spite of potentially deadly consequences. Instead of a lunch-counter sit-in, she was conducting a forest plant-in.

Maathai (2007) also used visual forms of ER to reveal that members of Kenya’s elite and Government sold off and massively clear-cut public forests for their personal enrichment and that of foreign logging enterprises: “We also alerted the press, and the Daily Nation newspaper hired a helicopter to fly over the forest and published the photographs on its front pages. The aerial shots brought home how much of the forest had been cleared and destroyed” (pp. 262–263). This is an example of how Maathai’s discourse and actions, along with aerial photos as visual rhetoric (Luaites & Hariman, 2001), exposed the displacement of both citizens and government from their proper roles as guardians of lands for the future. At the same time, her emplaced rhetorical actions constituted a peacebuilding shift to create public knowledge of this displacement. By the time Maathai assumed parliamentary and governmental duties, her rhetoric and leadership would lead to a re-emplacement of citizens and environment in politics (Vidal, 2011).

Internationalizing Emplaced Rhetoric

For audiences internationally, Maathai invoked the macro scale of the planet to create a sense of wider community with all humanity and nature. In Maathai’s ER, she frequently used trees as metaphors for peaceful change. In her discourses, trees function as tropes, bidding a cultural revival of traditional respect for nature. For instance, in her CC Commencement Address, Maathai (2006) urged the audience to “plant your saplings” (p. 25) and to appreciate the possibility that the audience might
just have been “the only graduating class that has ever carried a living tree seedling at their graduation ceremony” (p. 19). She offered the fact that “every one of us needs eight trees to take care of the carbon dioxide that we exhale. I am very happy to know that at least every one of you graduates are taking care of your responsibilities. You [each] have one tree that you will plant to take care of the carbon dioxide that you exhale. You can also plant for others” (p. 25). In this passage, Maathai factually described trees, rendering them a means for audience members to act: she asked them to plant trees as a symbolic way to link environmental consciousness to a simple environmental action of planting a sapling, which is easy to do. In this way, Maathai helped to show that environmental activism is not a complicated process.

Leading up to her invitation to the college graduates to plant a tree sapling as a small, locally achievable environmental act, Maathai (2006) reminded the audience of their place in the larger cosmos, saying, “This little planet is our home” (p. 19). She reminded the audience of the American slogan, “reduce, reuse, recycle.” She then linked the slogan to internationally shared norms of environmental awareness by noting the Japanese as a cultural model for attempting to cut waste associated with an “affluent” modern lifestyle; she urged a return to environmental consciousness in everyday practices, saying, “There is a [Japanese] Buddhist term called mottainai and this word means: Receive the resources with respect, receive resources with gratitude. Do not waste resources” (p. 21). Here she encouraged the audience to see that waste of precious resources is an international problem, but one that can be stemmed with personal action at the local level: “It is what we do individually that is important” (p. 24). Further, she urged the audience “to decide to take the responsibility and I am very, very proud of the fact that in this country citizens do take responsibility. Citizens do decide to hold their leaders accountable and by doing that you become an inspiration for so many other people in the world” (p. 24). In asking the audience to respect local traditions like recycling, mottainai, and tree planting, Maathai linked shared normative activities that are grounded and emplaced at local, national, and international levels. She indicated that such activities root individuals in self-sufficient communities while fostering a sense of environmental responsibility. On a larger scale, she invited each audience member to be mindful of their connection to planet Earth and to other peoples and cultures on earth.

As a telltale sign of ER, Maathai’s messages presented geographic, communal belonging as being perfectly in balance with belonging in the political order and governmental systems. By recreating a sense of rootedness in the natural world, Maathai invited disenfranchised persons to participate in budding democratic patterns of social power and access. Stamp (1995) confirmed that Maathai “succeeded in putting the environment on [Kenya’s] ... political agenda” (p. 82). By the time of her Nobel award as the very first environmentalist to receive the Peace Prize, she had also heightened the world’s awareness, effectively making the environment an integral part in global peacebuilding (Kiama, 2011; Vidal, 2011).

In connecting the importance of how environmental activism is peace activism, Maathai invited audiences to understand in a visceral way the responsibility of each citizen to participate in working toward “positive peace,” that is, a condition of peace
with social justice. Maathai’s ER asserted a belief that environmental justice upholds democratic social justice in three key ways: environmental management, resource allocation, and democratic institutions and practices. In her CC address, Maathai (2006) explained:

\[\ldots\] for us to enjoy peace, we need to manage our resources more responsibly, more sustainably, more accountably, more transparently and we need to share these resources more equitably. Yes, we do. And that the only way we can do so is if we learn to govern ourselves through systems and institutions that promote justice, that promote equity, that promote respect for the rule of law, that promote respect for human rights. Sometimes we call such systems democracy. (p. 5)

In this passage, words like “sharing,” “accountably,” and “human rights” point to strategies of peacebuilding that foster “democracy.” Maathai emphasized the rightful place of people within the political schema was a place where people are responsible for both environmental and social justice.

Maathai used ER to represent environmental justice as a physical, cultural, and political locus in the public sphere. Maathai portrayed environmental awareness as means to occupy democratic space. For instance, Maathai (2007) used the metaphoric example of the substitution by Kenyans of “beautiful, colorful baskets of different sizes and types made from sisal and other natural fibers” with “flimsy plastic bags to carry their goods” (p. 35). Maathai (2007) described the place of the plastic bags as a metaphor for the negative aspects of globalization, such as the “focus on a cash economy and cash crops” that she maintained has impoverished life for Kenyans (p. 35). Plastic substituted for sisal mirrored economic and social practices that have displaced people physically from nature, causing an “explosion of immigration” of villagers from rural areas to cities (p. 35). Maathai (2007) painted the town plastic, as it were, lamenting: “These plastics litter the parks and streets, blow into the trees and bushes, kill domestic animals (when they swallow them inadvertently), and provide breeding grounds for mosquitoes. They leave the town so dirty it is almost impossible to find a place to sit and rest away from their plastic bags” (p. 35). The use of action verbs, “litter,” “blow,” and “kill” emphasizes the unsettling movement of the plastic across town in everyday life. Plastics make it nearly “impossible” to “rest,” thus the plastics seem to appear in this passage like an invading force. She implies there seems no proper place in nature for plastics. Statements such as these demonstrate how Maathai used ER to contrast the pre-colonial era in Kenya, in which people could thrive sustainably and use natural goods such as sisal, with the contemporary postcolonial phase, in which modern, artificial products such as plastics evoke environmentally unsustainable movements of people and products from place to place, such as from self-sustaining rural villages to cities swirling with trash.

By contrasting an attractive past grounded in nature with a plastic, uneasy present, Maathai encouraged Kenyans, Africans, and others within postcolonial nations to retrieve from their cultural past an understanding or a standpoint of ways that environmentally unsustainable practices harm both people and the environment. Maathai used historical facts to convey narratives of Western influenced and
inequitable social structures and practices that were put in place to harm most Africans while only enriching elites. By letting historical and environmental evidence, rather than her own opinions, speak, her rhetorical strategy invited audiences to identify with her position. By providing copious evidence, readers could arrive at the conclusion that postcoloniality caused many of Africa’s dysfunctions. For instance, Maathai (2007) described the colonial displacement of indigenous persons from their own lands:

To consolidate their hold on their new territories in Africa, during the first decade and a half of the 20th Century the European governments encouraged people of European descent—among them South Africans, Australians, Canadians, Britons, Germans—to settle in their colonies. In Kenya, these settlers began arriving in increasing numbers and the British authorities gave them land in the highlands. The settlers found the highlands very attractive for the same reasons the local people do: the soil was fertile, debilitating diseases like malaria were absent, and it was neither too hot nor too cold—perfect weather. (p. 9)

Here Maathai did not discuss traumas of the people who were forced out by settlers. Instead, she focused on displacement of people and traditional, sustainable living practices with interlopers, whose agricultural practices depleted the land. Maathai (2007) contrasted pre- and early-colonial state of the land with what happened by the 1970s, when, for postdoctoral research, she studied cattle parasitic diseases:

While I was in the rural areas outside Nairobi collecting the ticks, I noticed that the rivers would rush down the hillsides and along paths and roads when it rained, and that they were muddy with silt. This was very different from when I was growing up. “That is soil erosion,” I remember thinking to myself. “We must do something about that.” I also observed that the cows were so skinny that I could count their ribs. There was little grass or other fodder for them to eat where they grazed, and during the dry season much of the grass lacked nutrients. (p. 121)

In this passage, Maathai used mostly unemotional terms. Maathai offered the image of herself as a science-based researcher as a rhetorical means with which to invite readers into the scene. In this manner, Maathai emplaces the audience into the environmental setting. Saying, “I noticed” and “I observed,” she positions the audience to see, through her, with new eyes, as if the audience were standing in her place and viewing the scenario of “silt,” “erosion,” and “dry,” non-nutritive grasses. Thus, the audience is invited from an emplaced vantage point to experience the environmental situation that Maathai describes. In passages such as this, Maathai used a grounded perspective in which the rhetor’s senses become the audience’s, creating rhetorical potential for them to unite in one perspective.

Maathai used ER to build her narrative of environmental destruction, demonstrating how such problems exacerbated conditions for human existence and, in turn, created conflicts. For example, following her description of “skinny” cattle and depleted lands, Maathai (2007) next observed “the people, too, looked undernourished” while rivers were “silted with topsoil, much of which was coming from the forest where plantations of commercial trees had replaced indigenous forest. I noticed that much of the land that had been covered by trees, bushes, and grasses
when I was growing up had been replaced by tea and coffee [plantations].” (p. 121).
This statement shows how she tended to rely more on facts than emotions to reveal
the problems wrought by practices that were unsustainable both in terms of human
rights and in terms of environmental viability. Maathai presented these examples of
mistakes as narratives that Kirkscey (2007) characterized as functioning rhetorically
like modern-day versions of old morality tales.
Using such anecdotes from Africa’s postcolonial historical continuum indicates
socio-political dimensions of ER. From Maathai’s perspective, past mistakes should
not be repeated. Ovesen, Fity, and Bengtsson (2008) explain that Maathai’s
postcolonial rhetoric differs from that of Franz Fanon because instead of focusing
on the traumatic victimhood identity and disempowered status of the colonized as
Fanon does, Maathai rejected such “passivity and subservience,” emphasizing instead
the activity and independence that she achieved, displaying herself as a positive role
model of achievable empowerment (p. 106). By first inviting audiences to understand
the place of environmental harms within the whole system, Maathai could then focus
on discussing equitable practices, such as returning to using sustainable practices and
products. By discursively cycling between physical and historical places and habits
linked to nature, she summoned in audiences images of ways to achieve political and
environmental justice locally and broadly in society.

Conclusion: Implications of Emplaced Rhetoric
This article’s purpose was to advance an understanding of ER by appreciating
Wangari Maathai’s oeuvre, illuminating processes of environmental discourse and
activism. I defined ER, demonstrating ways Maathai used ER to promote peace-
building based on geocentering audiences locally, nationally, regionally, and
internationally. ER extends rhetorical theory and criticism in ways that are useful
to scholars and practitioners of environmental communication. First, ER decenters
environmental rhetoric and activism away from Eurocentric texts and places,
incentivizing explorations into greening aspects of postcoloniality. Second, ER
recents the agency of heretofore marginalized rhetors such as black African women,
respecting and learning from them as emplaced persons with valuable knowledge.
Third, ER such as Maathai’s connects local places to what Wolbert (2011) identifies as
an international political space. Fourth, ER indicates embodied forms of environ-
mental activism and rhetoric are viable means of non-violent praxis promoting
change for socio-ecological justice.

Maathai invoked both micro and macro scales of emplacement, deftly using
rhetoric to engage audiences politically for environmental preservation. Maathai’s ER
exemplifies local activism that is based on local culture and which offers insights and
political meanings for broader audiences internationally. ER appeared in her
campaigns to save Uhuru Park and to protect Karura Forest through non-violent
tactics such as tree planting. Such activism as a lived form of ER accomplished more
than merely bemoaning environmental, political, and cultural crises, it bestowed a
measure of socio-political agency to the previously disempowered.
Maathai’s cooperative approach used communication as part of a holistic platform for helping women and others who are politically marginalized to address misuses of the earth’s natural resources (Hayanga, 2006; Muthuki, 2006). Examples of ER shown here illustrate how Maathai (2004) shifted the socio-political lens to a possible and attainable alternate reality. She provided both visualization and impetus to audiences to act on the productive possibilities of renewing natural systems in tandem with renewing the lives of people in communities (Kirkscey, 2007; Wolbert, 2011). Maathai’s ER indicated that traditions based on the natural world and its rhythms have been uprooted and displaced in the wake of colonialism and globalization. Maathai (2006, 2007, 2009, 2010) argued that socio-political systems would not flourish without natural world systems. Through ER Maathai demonstrated ways to rebuild these systems together, addressing past harms, reforming present practices, thereby creating impetus for future renewal.

Maathai’s ER is didactic in asserting peace can be achieved under conditions of substantive social justice. Evidence provided in this article indicates the possibility that ER may be integral to green justice, in which environmentally sound policies and practices become instituted. With the rise of popular green movements, from Maathai’s GBM in Kenya, to Germany’s Green Party, international changes are afoot. Maathai’s uses of ER indicate that non-violent forms of environmental communication and activism help to successfully challenge long-held beliefs and practices. By appealing to her audiences’ respective senses of place within their own communities on this shared planet, Maathai addressed diverse domestic and international audiences, urging them to adapt and adjust to environmentally driven socio-political realities (Araeen, 2009).

Maathai’s uses of ER reinforced messages urging audiences to undertake sustainable environmental activities that ultimately contribute to peacebuilding. Maathai’s ER funnelled discourses of green politics and postcolonial peacebuilding, fomenting globally shared activist strategies. Maathai’s gains indicate that emplaced rhetorical activism is a means to create non-violent change. Maathai’s ER called upon audiences to recognize each person’s responsibility and need for environmentally sustainable practices. Maathai questioned structurally violent practices that harm the earth and its inhabitants, uniting people across Northern and Southern hemispheres, merging needs of those in both established and in newly emerging economies (Hayanga, 2006; UNEP, 2011; Vidal, 2011). Future studies of ERs of other powerful postcolonial peace leaders, such as Nobel Peace laureate Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, beckon. The relevance and pull of green politics delivered through ER such as Wangari Maathai’s is poised to continue to grow and bear further study in the decades to come.

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