Slow Violence, Gender, and the Environmentalism of the Poor

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To address the challenges of slow violence is to confront the dilemma Rachel Carson faced over forty years ago in seeking to dramatize what she called “death by indirection” (32). Carson’s subjects were biomagnification and toxic drift, forms of oblique, slow-acting violence that, like climate change and desertification, pose formidable imaginative difficulties for writers and activists alike. How, in an age that venerates the instant and the spectacular, can one turn attritional calamities starring nobody into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment? In struggling to give shape to an amorphous menace, both Carson and reviewers of Silent Spring resorted to a narratological vocabulary: one reviewer portrayed the book as exposing “the new, unplotted and mysterious dangers we insist upon creating all around us,” (Sevareid 3) while Carson herself wrote of “a shadow that is no less ominous because it is formless and obscure” (238).¹

To confront what I am calling slow violence requires that we attempt to give symbolic shape and plot to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time. Politically and emotionally, different kinds of disaster possess unequal heft. Falling bodies, burning towers, exploding heads have a visceral, page-turning potency that tales of slow violence cannot match. Stories of toxic buildup, massing greenhouse gases, or desertification may be cataclysmic, but they’re scientifically convoluted cataclysms in which casualties are deferred, often for generations. In the gap between acts of slow violence and their delayed effects both memory and causation readily fade from view and the casualties thus incurred pass untallied.

The long dyings that ensue from slow violence are out of sync not only with our dramatic expectations, but with the swift seasons of electoral change. How can leaders be goaded to avert catastrophe when the political rewards of their actions will be reaped on someone else’s watch, decades, even centuries from now? How can environmental storytellers and activists help counter the potent forces of political self-interest, procrastination, and dissembling? We see such dissembling at work, for instance, in the afterword to Michael Crichton’s 2004 environmental conspiracy novel, State of Fear, where he argues that we need twenty more years of data gathering
on climate change before any policy decisions can be made (626). For his pains, Crichton, though he lacked even an undergraduate science degree, was appointed to President Bush’s special committee on climate change.

The oxymoronic notion of slow violence poses representational, statistical, and legislative challenges. The under-representation of slow violence in the media results in the discounting of casualties—from, for example, the toxic aftermaths of wars—which in turn exacerbates the difficulty of securing effective legal measures for preemption, restitution, and redress.

The representational challenges are acute, requiring creative ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects. To intervene representationally requires that we find both the iconic symbols to embody amorphous calamities and the narrative forms to infuse them with dramatic urgency. In an age of degraded attention spans it becomes doubly difficult to focus on the toll exacted, over time, by ecological degradation. We live, as Microsoft executive Linda Stone puts it, in an age of “continuous partial attention” (qtd. in Friedman A27). Fast is faster than it used to be and story units have become concomitantly shorter. In this cultural milieu, the intergenerational aftermath becomes a harder sell. So to render slow violence visible entails, among other things, redefining speed: we see such efforts in talk of accelerated species loss, rapid climate change, and in attempts to recast “glacial”—once a dead metaphor for slow—as a rousing, iconic image of unacceptably fast loss.

Efforts to infuse slow violence with an urgent visibility suffered a setback in America with the events of 9/11, which reinforced a narrow image of what it means to be at risk—as a nation, a species, and a planet. The fiery spectacle of the collapsing towers was burned into the national psyche as the definitive image of violence, exacerbating for years the difficulty of rallying public sentiment against attritional violence like global warming, a threat that is both incremental and exponential. Condoleezza Rice’s strategic fantasy of a mushroom cloud suspended over America if the United States failed to invade Iraq and topple Saddam Hussein gave further visual definition to the idea of cataclysmic violence as something explosive and instantaneous, a recognizably cinematic, pyrotechnic event.

The representational bias against slow violence has statistical ramifications; under-represented casualties—human and environmental—are the casualties most likely to be discounted. We see this, for instance, in the way wars whose lethal repercussions sprawl across space and time are tidily book-ended in the historical record. A 2003 New York Times editorial on Vietnam reported, “during our dozen years there, the U.S. killed and helped kill at least 1.5 million people” (“Vietnam” A25). That simple word “during,” however, shrinks the toll: hundreds of thousands survived the war years, only to lose their lives prematurely to Agent Orange. In a 2002
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study, the environmental scientist Arnold Schecter recorded dioxin levels in the bloodstream of Bien Hoa residents at 135 times the levels of Hanoi’s inhabitants, who lived far north of the spraying (Schecter 516). The afflicted include thousands of children born decades after the war’s end. More than thirty years after the last spraying run, Agent Orange continues to wreak havoc as, through biomagnification, dioxins build up in the fatty tissues of pivotal foods like duck and fish and pass from the natural world into the cooking pot and from there to ensuing human generations. “During”: a small word, yet a powerful reminder of how easily the belated casualties of slow violence are habitually screened from view.

The Green Belt Movement and Sustainable Security

Kenya’s Green Belt Movement, founded by Wangari Maathai, serves as an animating instance of collective mobilization against slow violence, in this case the incremental violence of desertification and deforestation. At the heart of the movement’s activism stand these urgent questions: What does it mean to be at risk? What does it mean, long term, to be secure? How can we most effectively represent, acknowledge, and counter the violence of delayed effects?

The recent appearance of Maathai’s memoir, Unbowed, provides an opportunity to assess the strategies that the Green Belt Movement devised to challenge foreshortened definitions of environmental and human security. What has emerged from the Green Belt Movement’s ascent is an alternative narrative of national security that challenged 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 has sought to foreground the longer timeline of slow violence, both in exposing environmental degradation and in advancing environmental recovery.

The Green Belt Movement had modest beginnings. On Earth Day in 1977, Maathai and a small cohort of the likeminded planted seven trees to commemorate Kenyan women who had been environmental activists (Lappe and Lappe 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 thirty million trees, mostly in Kenya, but in a dozen other African countries as well (Unbowed 175). 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 as far afield as India. As such, the Green Belt Movement has symbolized and enacted the conviction that, as Lester Brown has declared in another context, “a strategy for eradicating poverty will not succeed if an economy’s environmental support systems
are collapsing” (1).

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 struggle against desertification segued into a struggle against illicit deforestation perpetrated by Kenya’s draconian regime. Neither desertification 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 what one might call 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

> Whatever 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. (15)

This war, Hertzberg continued, was not the kind that “expanded the battlefield to encompass whole societies” (15). 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. What he failed to observe, trailing behind those luminous technologies of precision streaking across the sky, was the shadow of imprecision that for years, decades, generations will claim the lives of random civilians through the lethal legacy of depleted uranium munitions and unexploded cluster bombs. Wars that have receded into memory often continue, through their active residues, to maim and slaughter for generations. Depending on the ordnance and strategies deployed, a quick “smart” war may morph into a long-term killer, leaving behind landscapes of dragging death.

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 desertification’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. (The Green Belt Movement 38)

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 desertification 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.

Desertification 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 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 desertification can fuel conflicts for decades, costing (directly and indirectly) 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” (141). 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, since the arrival of British colonialists in the late nineteenth century, has lost 98 percent of its anchoring, cleansing, and cooling forest cover (Maathai, *Unbowed* 281).

The Theatre of the Tree

The Green Belt Movement’s achievements in engaging the violence of deforestation and desertification flow 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 the 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 the British colonialists and later by their neo-colonial legatees. Third, the Green Belt Movement made strategic use of what I call intersectional environmentalism to broaden their base and credibility in Kenya and abroad.

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. Desertification and deforestation are corrosive, compound threats that damage vital watersheds, exacerbate the silting and dessication 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” (73).

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” (Selva 9). To plant trees was metaphorically to cultivate democratic change; with a slight vegetative tweak, the gesture could breathe new life into the dead metaphor of grass roots 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 counter-image 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. As William Finnegan has observed in a broader international context,

... 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. (48)

There is something perverse about an economic order in which the unsustainable, ill-managed plunder of resources is calculated not as a loss of GNP but as productive growth.

To plant trees is, in the fullest sense of the phrase, to work toward cultivating change. In an era of widening social inequity and unshared growth, the replenished forest offered an egalitarian and participatory image of growth—growth as sustainable over the long haul. 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 self-interest. 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 time frame, the long duree 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 (Maathai, *Unbowed* 262). The cleared, appropriated land was being sold on the cheap to cabinet ministers and other presidential cronies who planned to build luxury developments—golf courses, hotels, and gated communities—on it. Maathai and her followers, armed with nothing but oak saplings, with which they sought to begin replanting the plundered
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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 valencies at different points in human history, as 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. As Michael Pollan notes, “after the Restoration, 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” (194). To early American colonists, tree felling was typically viewed as an act of progress that often doubled as a way of improving the land and claiming it for one’s own.

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 (Guha 115-24). 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’s approach was the way that, in protesting deforestation, they went beyond the standard strategies of civil disobedience (sit ins, tree hugging, or chaining themselves to trees), turning instead to active reforestation as the 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.

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 than say, desertification, of decisive accountability. 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” (Pal 5).

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. Maathai’s memoir doesn’t engage this question of anti-colonial 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 neo-colonial 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 anti-colonialism, an heroic place which, during the Mau Mau uprising from 1952-1958, achieved a mythic potency among both the British colonialists and those Kenyans—primarily Kikuyu—who fought for freedom and the restitution of their land.

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. 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 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o among them, have all testified. From an environmental perspective, *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngũgĩ'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” (702). 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 anti-colonial ally of Mau Mau forest fighters pledging oaths of liberation.

The gender politics of all this are complex and compelling. In the 1950s, the forest served as a bastion not just of anti-colonialism, but also 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 neo-colonialism. So the showdown at Karura reprised the anti-colonial history of forest resistance in a different key: now the core fighters—Maathai's “foresters without diplomas”—were female and unarmed. Does this double rescripting of resistance help explain the particularly vicious backlash from Kenya's male political establishment?

Intersectional Environmentalism, Gender, and Colonial 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 I'm calling 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. 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 National Environmental Programme, which led in turn to ever widening circles of international access (Maathai, *Unbowed* 120).

Maathai's intersectional approach to environmental justice contrasted starkly with the dominant colonial traditions of conservation, which had focused on spectacular megafauna. That sharply masculinist tradition—in Kenya and, more broadly, in East and Southern Africa—was associated with
forced removal, with the colonial appropriation of land, and with an anti-human ecology. That tradition remains part of Kenya’s economic legacy, a legacy associated not just with human displacement, but in contemporary Kenya 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, rhino, lion, 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 demonstrates, 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” (264). 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” (Mackenzie 700). 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 Green Belt Movement, allowing it 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 continued to expand 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 Green Belt Movement at the crossroads between environmental rights and women’s rights made historic sense. Women in Kenya have born 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 neo-colonial 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 (Jeffries 7).

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 desertification 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 that 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 historically had been at the raw end of plunder that benefited minute male elites, whether 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 (Maathai, Unbowed 179). 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.

Environmental Agency and Ungovernable Women: Maathai and Carson

Maathai and 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 self-satisfaction and profitable complicity 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. 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 perception and legislation their work wrought, 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 prevented her from pursuing a PhD. Her background was in public science writing; she had no university affiliation at a time when only one percent of tenured scientists in America were women (Lear 254). 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 (qtd. in Lear 429).

Hostile reviewers dismissed Carson’s arguments as “hysterically overemphatic” (“Pesticides”) and as “more emotional than accurate” (qtd. in Lear 461). 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” (Lear 417). Other commentators deduced that “Miss Rachel Carson’s reference to the selfishness of insecticide manufacturers probably reflects her Communist sympathies” (Lear 409). 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” (qtd. in “The Silent Spring of Rachel Carson”). In the ultimate vilification of Carson as embodying a model of irrational female treachery, a critic in *Aerosol Age* concluded, “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” (DAD).17

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 divorcee, 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 PhD, 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 field—as suspiciously overqualified, as a woman who had to be brought down because she was overreaching.18 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 (Selva 8).

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 cabinet minister railed against Maathai as “an ignorant and ill-tempered puppet of foreign masters” (qtd. in Motavelli 11). Another criticized her for “not being enough of an African woman,” of being “a white woman in black skin” (Maathai, *Unbowed* 110). 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” (111).15 President Moi (who imprisoned Maathai several times) chastised her for being “disobedient” (115); if she were “a proper woman in
the African tradition—[she] should respect men and be quiet” (196).

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.

This is certainly borne out in Maathai’s case: she fell foul of proliferating “uns”—unAfrican, unKenyan, unKikuyu, 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 currents of environmental practice that were consistent with notions like biodiversity, the commons, and ecological stewardship, but not necessarily reducible to them. In this way she could also try to defuse accusations that she was a Western agent of “green imperialism.”

The vehemence of the 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 extra-institutional positions allowed them the scientific autonomy and political integrity to speak out against attritional environmental violence and help mobilize against it.

Conclusion

If Maathai’s nativist detractors sought to discredit her as an enemy of national development, she also faced, when awarded the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, a different style of criticism from abroad. Carl I. Hagen, leader of Norway’s Progress Party, typifies this line of aggressive disbelief: “It’s odd,” Hagen observes, “that the [Nobel] committee has completely overlooked the unrest that the world is living with daily, and given the prize to an environmental activist” (qtd. in Tyler, “In Wartime” A5). 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,” the 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" (qtd. in Tyler, "Peace Prize" A5).

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 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.

Perhaps to Hagen and others like him, tree planting is conflict resolution lite; it lacks a dramatic, decisive, newsworthy military target. 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" (qtd. in Quist-Arcton 1).

Coda

The aftermath of Kenya's December 2007 elections has witnessed inter-ethnic killings and counter-killings and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of citizens. The surface trigger of this cataclysm was electoral fraud. However, it is crucial to recognize the broader, over-determined forces—including environmental; class; gender; and generational and economic forces, internal and global—that contributed to this apparent
outburst of ethnic fundamentalism. Kenya’s post-electoral violence, as David Anderson points out, “has an ethnic element, but tribalism is a description of these events not an explanation” (“Kenya’s Agony” 5).

Because slow violence is unphotogenic, makes for undramatic copy, and requires a long attention span, when rapid, direct violence erupts it is far easier for the media to briskly ascribe it to “atavistic ethnic hatreds” than to track the deeper, systemic roots. The post-electoral killings and mass displacements far from being atavistic are more accurately to be read as expressing profound contradictions within Kenya’s modern state.

Unequal access to resources—land, jobs, power, and hope—do exist among Kenya’s forty-two ethnicities. However, by far the most glaring chasm separates the elite and the poor of all ethnic backgrounds. Despite a much-lauded average five percent growth during President Mwai Kibaki’s five-year term, almost half of Kenya’s thirty-six million people survive on $1,200 per annum or less, while cabinet ministers annually take home on average around $155,000 (Nyambura-Mwaura).

Together the discourses of “economic growth” and “atavistic tribal hatreds” camouflage a gross failure of distributive justice that has a profound environmental component. Kenya is both a “success story” and one of the world’s most unequal societies: it ranks 152nd in terms of equitable distribution of wealth. Whatever his relative advances over the tyranny of the Moi years, Kibaki failed to address the long duree of dispossession that has left land and wealth concentrated in the hands of a few. If Kenya is a democracy, it remains a plutocratic democracy with an almost imperial presidency whose excessive powers exacerbate a winner-takes-all mentality.

Wangari Maathai, reflecting in her memoir on the Rift Valley violence that engulfed the 1992 elections, noted how readily environmental stresses could heighten the kind of desperation that was easily manipulated by a power-hungry political elite (Unbowed 236-37). Officially, the cycles of post-electoral violence have been inter-ethnic, yet they have been inflamed in large part by the convergence of increasing numbers of mobile pastoralists and sedentary agriculturalists on increasingly degraded land. This competition for stressed space, one should note, has both a rural and an urban manifestation. Together, the expansion of tea plantations and other vast estates of industrial scale, export-oriented agriculture, the unaddressed colonial legacy of over-concentrated land (exacerbated by neo-colonial cronyism), and deforestation and desertification have put the squeeze on subsistence, driving hundreds of thousands of the rural poor toward the cities, often less out of hope than out of the sheer impossibility of surviving in the countryside. As a result—especially in Nairobi—extreme wealth and extreme poverty live in combustible proximity, where the acute stratification of the city readily takes on ethnic dimensions. In the city’s Kibera slum,
some areas have 80,000 inhabitants per square kilometer, while in the glossy suburb of Karen only 360 inhabitants live in a comparable area (Vasagar 6). It is no coincidence, then, that the Rift Valley and the Nairobi slums have become epicenters of intolerance and brutality.

In an incisive essay called “Hitting without Violence,” the exiled Ugandan writer, Kalundi Serumaga argues, “Kenya was and is an atrocity a long time made and a catastrophe a long time coming.” The result is poor-on-poor violence. “If you kill a cop,” Serumaga observes, “ten will come back; if you kill a child of the rich, your fellow poor will be offered reward money to find you. If you kill a fellow poor ‘non-you’ you have found the perfect victim.” Thus cynical political elites in both major parties have fomented proxy wars, waged by the poor in a desperate bid for power at all costs.24

These proxy wars have a deep-seated gender dimension, as warrior masculinity becomes the dominant mode of conflict and the primary media image of inter-ethnic relations. Whether it is Kikuyu Mungiki criminal gangs dismembering Luos in the Nairobi slums or bow-and-arrowed Kalenjin warriors stalking “alien” Kikuyus in the Rift Valley, images of immediate, spectacular inter-ethnic male violence dominate the media’s explanatory script. Yet questions need to be asked about the extreme marginalization of women from Kenya’s political elite and about the near-invisibility in the media of the leading role women have played in initiating reconciliation and engaging the underlying slow violence that keeps fueling fresh cycles of overt brutality.

“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” (18). Dimock is reflecting here on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, yet her words apply with equal force to contemporary Kenya, where local and transnational structures of slow violence sustain tinderbox conditions that a cynical political elite can readily ignite at great cost to the society’s systemically disenfranchised.

Notes

1. Although Carson had almost nothing to say on the subjects of colonialism and race, her work speaks powerfully to the environmentalism of the poor precisely because of her concern with the complicity of the military-industrial complex in concealing toxicity, with discounted casualties, and with the transnational fallout of lethal actions that are often remote in space and time.
I'm adapting the term “the environmentalism of the poor” from Guha and Martinez-Alier’s groundbreaking work on that subject (3-16).

2. In this context, one recalls that the public furor stirred up by *Silent Spring* overlapped with another high water mark of American paranoia, the Cuban Missile Crisis. Carson exhorted an America awash with paranoia to take charge of its fears by changing the way it lived, by acting differently in the short term to reduce long-term catastrophic risk. Carson redirected some of the national anxiety away from the Red Peril to the aerosol Doom perched on the kitchen shelf. By revealing how small, domestic choices could help secure a more inhabitable world, *Silent Spring* altered the landscape of fear—and ultimately, the laws as well.

3. 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 that 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. (U.S. Department of Defense)

4. For a related and insightful discussion of what she calls “articulated categories,” see Anne McClintock (4ff).

5. 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.

6. A major precursor to the conflict over Karura had occurred in 1989. The regime had been steadily appropriated 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.


8. For the history of the forest fighters, see Elkins, Maloba, and especially Anderson (Histories of the Hanged 230-88).

9. For the most comprehensive discussion of this literature, see Maughan-Brown.

10. 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.

11. In many Kenyan novels about the Mau Mau period, the forest fighters are depicted with a claying 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).

12. 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.

13. See Beinart and Coates, Carruthers, and Mackenzie.

14. Mackenzie, like Beinart, stresses that among the colonial officialdom were some dissident voices who recognized the value and applicability of local agricultural and environmental knowledge (Mackenzie 710-14).

15. 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 of her adult life, she became a writer of testimony only in her later years.

16. Additionally, a review by Carl Hodge was entitled “Silent Spring Makes Protest Too Hysterical.”

17. I am grateful to Lindsay Woodbridge for first drawing my attention to this review in her fine unpublished senior thesis, “The Fallout of Silent Spring.”

18. 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, denying her, moreover, 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.

19. For a more elaborate account of the burden of traditionalism placed on women in the context of a Janus-faced modernity, see McClintock, pages 294-300.

20. There are echoes between the nativist arguments mounted against her by President Moi and the arguments of her ex-husband, Mwangi, who testified in court that he was divorcing her because she was ungovernable: “too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn, and too hard to control” (Maathai, Unbowed 146).

21. Morten Hoeglund, a member of Norway’s Progress Party, concurred with Hagen, arguing “the committee should have focused on more important matters, such as weapons of mass destruction” (Selva 9).

22. 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).

23. 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 during, for instance, 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.

24. Compare this with Daniel Branch’s observation that “Kibaki and his clique stole an election in the knowledge that the people who would pay the penalty for their actions would almost certainly be from their own power base, the Kikuyu in the Rift Valley” (Branch 27).
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